

This has been edited by Justlovereadin'. Thank him for his efforts as he got it back to me within a day.

Chapter 7: Journey through the Weird

With the rescued but unconscious Dynaheir in Minsc's arms, the adventurers retreated to the room in which they had fought the gnoll chieftain and his immediate bodyguard. It was easily the most defensible position within the keep, other than the jail cell area, and no one was going to be using that area for anything.

Minsc carried Dynaheir into the large room and laid her out, followed by Jaheira, who looked her over and began to bind up her ankles, wrists and fingers with simple wrappings. At the same time, Harry and Khalid worked, creating a barricade in front of the door leading out to the rest of the keep. Unfortunately, Harry's being encumbered by the weight of two dead bodies in his Item Box impacted his ability to carry things physically, forcing Harry to take Garrick's body out and lay it aside until they were finished.

Imoen had offered to help, but with her puny strength stat, she could barely lift one of the smaller pieces of rubble and annoyed, Imoen moved over to the other two, helping to gently straighten out Dynaheir's broken fingers for Jaheira's splints, an act Minsc's larger fingers were unsuited for. The fact Dynaheir didn't even move as they did so was not a good sign, Imoen reflected.

The defense set up to his satisfaction, Harry turned his attention to creating a fire from the embers of one of the ones that had been in this room previously, one that hadn't been used recently. The smell of the meat the gnolls had been eating was not appetizing, to say the least. Harry was silent as he worked, staring into the fire as it began to grow for a few seconds before shaking himself and reaching into his Item Box for more of their foodstuffs.

He hadn't yet begun to cook when twin growls of hunger swept across the room, causing Harry to grab for his sword, before realizing the sound had come from Imoen and Minsc. "Sorry about that," Imoen laughed somewhat sheepishly. "It's been a long while since breakfast, know what I mean? The fruits we got from the Elder Dryad don't fill you up at all."

"While the noise of Minsc's mighty stomach was somewhat off-putting to little Boo, Minsc will not apologize. He is a mighty warrior, and mighty warriors must have equally mighty appetites."

"You will have to wait for a moment before Harry feeds us another of his amazing meals," Jaheira commanded, crooking a finger towards Harry. Harry raised an eyebrow at her, not moving any closer, and she gestured down to Dynaheir. "Tell me what your gamer skills can about this woman's injuries."

At that, Harry's flicker of ire at Jaheira's peremptory command faded, and he stood up, moving over to the others as he looked down at

Name: Dynaheir

Gender: Female

Race: Human

Class: Level 6 Mage.

Relationship Status: N/A *Locked*

Note: the background of this individual is locked. The woman in question is unconscious.

Eye-clicking through that message, Harry looked at the negative statuses affecting the woman. He whistled a little, shaking his head. "Okay, so malnutrition and being hungry aren't exactly the same thing as I thought. First, Dynaheir is suffering from multiple concussions. I didn't even think that multiple concussions were a thing. Because of that, she's taken minus nine to her willpower, intelligence and wisdom. Ouch."

"It isn't, not really. You can have a concussion, but it can be worsened by further blows to the head while you should be recovering," Jaheira said, playing with the beads in her hair in worry. "That kind of thing can have a permanent negative effect on her mental health. Do you..."

"I don't see anything about that. The message says that the impact of the concussion on Dynaheir's stats can be cured if treated properly over time." When Jaheira nodded, Harry went on, reading the description of the second status effect. "Malnourished is next. The message about that says that she is suffering from long term nutritional needs, taking away from her stats at a minus one per day Dynaheir has been inflicted with. 'Only through a long term well-balanced diet can this status be cured'," Harry quoted, before going on quickly. "On the other hand, hunger is a short-term malady that can be cured quickly through eating, but until it is cured, Dynaheir gets several minuses to all her physical stats, minus four across the board. But they aren't semi-permanent like the ones from malnutrition."

Tsking, Jaheira nodded. "The precise impact to her mental faculties and everything else is nice to know, but you don't see anything more important, internal bleeding or similar?" *Not that we could do anything about it right now if there was such*, the druid thought in annoyance. She had not a single healing spell to her name at present, and beyond Harry's Lay on Hands, which he had used at the end of the battle against the Gnoll Chieftan, none of the others had any such facility.

"No, I don't see anything like that. The only other two negative status penalties are hobbled and fingerless. Hobbled, I'm assuming that has something to do with how swollen Dynaheir's ankles are. 'It gives the same status effect as being heavily encumbered, the

individual so impaired cannot move on their own. this physical ailment is caused by damage to the legs, which hampers one's movement.' And the fingerless is equally self-explanatory if rather darrrrk!"

As Harry was about to finish speaking, his voice broke off into a yawn, one that forced open his jaw so wide it actually hurt for a second. He flushed in embarrassment, looking away from the others. "Sorry, it's been a long day."

Imoen and Minsc heartedly agreed with that, while Khalid simply nodded his head, and Jaheira chuckled. It was somewhat refreshing to see the youth, who normally seemed if not mature, then at least self-controlled, having a moment like that.

"And here I thought it was only straightforward women that would embarrass you?" Imoen teased.

Remembering that morning with the Druid, Harry scowled at her, before shaking his head. "Only forward in that manner, thank you."

"And you with all that experience with the barmaid back in Candlekeep," Imoen continued her verbal assault.

"Oh, did he leave a ladylove behind?" Jaheira inquired. While she normally wasn't interested in gossip, the teasing variety did interest her somewhat.

Imoen shook her head but was still directing a teasing smirk toward Harry, happy to jolly him out of what she had seen as the beginnings of a funk while he was working with the fire. "Not really. They Cassandra did spend a few months flirting with one another. I couldn't tell you the number of times that Harry came away from those meetings blushing and confused. Still, he eventually got the hang of it. And if you spend any time with the Dryad, I'm sure you'll get used to her too."

"Which she would take as a challenge," Jaheira chuckled, shaking her head. "Then again, perhaps Harry could rise to that challenge too,"

"Anyway, what can you do for Dynaheir?" Harry interjected, redirecting the conversation before the teasing assault could continue.

Jaheira sobered, staring down at their patient and Minsc kneeling beside her. "Dynaheir's being hobbled and having broken fingers and wrists are the easiest things for me to take care of. Minor healing spells will do nicely for those. Concussions are very tricky, however, as they impact the mind. The best thing to do is to let a person with a concussion rest. Healing spells can only do so much on the mind unless the one casting it is a dedicated mind healer. The brain is simply too complex for even directed spellwork like healing spells to do much about."

"As for the malnourishment..." Jaheira frowned, looking over at Minsc. "How long were you two captive, and how long were you on the run?"

“The gnolls kept mighty Minsc captive for a week or more, the first day is rather fuzzy to Minsc. But then he was able to break out through the use of his great berserker strength! But alas, when in the grips of such, time loses all meaning.” Minsc growled, tapping a finger against his belt buckle as he thought before Boo squeaked in his ear. “Boo is not so good with days, but he says that it felt as if we were traveling for quite some time, and then blue, and Minsc were on the run for at least another day and a half, perhaps two.”

That bit of information hadn't come out before, and Harry wasn't the only one to whistle in surprise at how long Minsc had been on the trail alone, possibly stuck in his berserk state as he tried to leave the gnolls behind. That spoke of the larger man's endurance and his willpower too, whatever his stat in that area, minus Boo's influence, might have implied.

Jaheira, however, kept her mind on the information. “Despite a hamster's ability to tell one day from the next being somewhat dubious to me, I must take that into account, as well as the fact Dynaheir was no doubt healthy before being captured. Malnourishment shouldn't set in that quickly unless one is without salt and water for that time. So a lot of water. And I doubt not that Dynaheir would refuse any meat, jerky or otherwise that the gnolls gave her for fear of who it might have been.”

Harry blanched at that. “Wait, they, they wouldn't really...”

“they would,” Jaheira replied sharply. “To Gnolls, men are just as edible as any other beast.”

“Suddenly, any guilt I might have felt about wiping them out is gone. Before it can even appear in point of fact,” Harry snarled, looking angrier than any of his companions had seen him before this.

Jaheira simply nodded at that. “Truly, but as we cannot kill them twice, and I would halt any attempt to resurrect them to do so, let us deal further with Dynaheir. Soup, salt, in that order. Meat and vegetables after that.”

“Nutritional food, right,” Harry affirmed. “I can make up anything she wants, as much as she wants.”

“Control yourself,” Jaheira chuckled at Harry's enthusiasm. *For all his strength and odd abilities, it is his skill as a cook he seems to take the most pride in. That speaks well of him, I suppose.* “Quantity isn't what we want to present moment, nutritional quality is. Don't just stuff her full of food,” she admonished, looking at Minsc, who had pulled out a large chunk of bread and was ready to stuff into Dynaheir's mouth.

Wondering idly why he had just gained five trust points with Jaheira, Harry nodded and turned back to the fire. There he pulled out various foodstuffs as he prepared a meal for them all.

Nearby, Imoen lay down on the ground, watching Harry and everyone else with half-lidded eyes, exhaustion claiming the thief now that her adrenaline had worn off. *Stupid low endurance stat. Times like this, I really miss my original body.* After a few minutes, she was only kept awake by chewing on a bit of jerky that she had taken from their supplies.

Despite his own hunger, Minsc stayed where he was crouched down next to Dynaheir, making no move to leave her side. Indeed his body language and the fact his claymore was laid out nearby gave everyone else the impression that he would become violent should anyone even suggest he do so.

In contrast, Khalid moved away from the others slightly, standing next to a large chunk of debris leaning up against a pillar, at which point he began to pull off his armor one piece at a time wincing all the while as he laid each piece out. He was soon down to his undershirt, and Jerkins and the pain had not yet left him. Every part of Khalid ached, his collarbone most particularly.

With difficulty, Khalid looked down at it and was unsurprised to see a rather spectacular bruise developing there from where a blow had landed right at where the pauldron meant the chest plate. It had bent the metal there out of shape something fierce, and throughout the rest of the battle had continued to grind into the bone and sinew of his shoulder.

Yet that was not the worst of it for Khalid. No, what pained him was his pride when he thought about how well he and Jaheira had been doing since they had first encountered the gnolls. He and Jaheira had been traveling as messengers and low-level adventurers for the Harpers ever since the Curse, and this was the first time they'd come up against a situation which really ground into his head how much they had lost after being hit by that mage's Curse. Yes, this place would've been tough for him and his wife before there curse, but it would've still been possible for just the two of them.

Now? Now it had taken Harry, his use of tactics, formations, and frankly showing that he and Imoen were well beyond what most adventurers of their levels were capable of to win the day. *And even then, it was ludicrously close. If not for the healing berries, the Gourds of Power and the rest of the fruit that Jaheira had convinced the Dryad to give them, we might well have lost anyway. Two dead, myself battered nearly into looking more like a black and blue mark than a half-elf, and the others well below a quarter of their health too.*

The only one of them that was still in combat shape was Jaheira, and that was because of Harry's tactics again. He had basically put her in the back of every battle they'd been in where he could, him, Edwin and Garrick. *The whole campaign was actually quite well done, but it shouldn't have had to be. It shouldn't have ever been that close! That blasted Curse! It's going to become a major issue going forward in young Harry's company, I feel.*

Sighing, Khalid shook his head, muttering, "I need a drink." With that, he began to rummage through his Item Box, removing items one after another until Khalid finally came to

what he wanted, one of the bottles of wine that he had bought back in the Friendly Arm Inn. Sitting down next to his armor, Khalid took a long pull of the wind, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling.

Looking up from where she had been binding Dynaheir's fingers and ankles, Jaheira noticed this causing her to scowl. Deal with that in a moment, she thought to herself, turning and sending a slight smile towards Harry as he stood behind her, handing down a bowl of soup. "Thank you, Harry."

"When will my Witch wake up, do you think?" Minsc asked. "It would do my warrior heart good to see her smile, even to hear her complain about Boo again."

"She doesn't like the little animal? That shows uncommon good taste." Jaheira's tone was biting, yet also teasing, Harry having confided in the others the bonuses that having Boo on him gave Minsc somehow. "As for when your Witch will wake up, Dynaheir has sustained several hard blows to the head. This wasn't one concussion were dealing with, but a concussion, exacerbated further by several hard knocks to the head as I told Harry earlier. She will only wake up when her mind is capable of facing the world once more. All we can do until then is make certain her body is as healed and as fit as we can make it. Which is scant little now, alas."

The blonde half-elf frowned for a moment, thinking hard as her fingers gently probed into the other woman's hair, feeling along her scalp. "I don't think they purposely set out to damage Dynaheir mentally, yet the overall effect... I think it was part of how they were trying to break her for further interrogation."

Harry frowned at that, squatting on Dynaheir's other side looking down at her thoughtfully as Jaheira started to feed the woman the soup one slow spoonful at a time, examining her in the light of the various torches and the fire behind Harry. In contrast to Minsc, who was mostly lightly tanned, Dynaheir was far darker in skin tone. Harry had heard the phrase dusky maiden, a time or two since arriving in this world, and she certainly fit the bill, her skin glimmering darkly in the light of the torches and fire. To Harry, she looked almost like someone had added twelve years or so to Angelina Johnson, then made her wear a number of gold accessories before wrapping her in the rags of a barbarian woman.

Indeed, Dynaheir's clothing was more rags than whole at present, but those rags looked as if they should've been pretty expensive-looking, hardwearing certainly, but expensive, done in purple and light blue, with a necklace of some kind hidden underneath hanging right over her bodice. Her curves were impressive too, not as much as Cassandra, but certainly more than Imoen and a little more than even Jaheira, who was most decidedly the athletic archetype. She had wider hips, shorter legs, and dainty feet for some reason beyond her broken ankles, along with bracelets of some kind on her wrist.

“They didn’t kidnap her for food, didn’t kidnap her for what she was carrying, or they would have stripped her of those like they did you of everything, Minsc. I agree, Jaheira, and didn’t that one talkative gnoll mention something about Masters? I think they came after you and Dynaheir under orders of someone else.” Harry gestured down to the bangles on Dynaheir’s wrists. “Unless these have some kind of spell on them to keep them on Dynaheir’s body?”

“I believe they are not magical, or at least not in the manner of the big booms and the shooting of fire. Though they are precious to Dynaheir, and she never takes them off. Beyond that, Minsc cannot tell you.” Minsc rumbled in a deep, angry voice. “But you think that someone targeted Minsc and Dynaheir? This villain will need to be the target of a good butt-kicking!”

To this, no one had anything to say, and silence fell as Jaheira continued to feed Dynaheir. After that, she turned to a meal that Harry had prepared for everyone else, strips of grilled deer, marinated in some kind of wine sauce that made it taste amazing to Jaheira, and she shook her head, staring at the young man from Candlekeep. “Truly, you will spoil us.”

“S, s, spoil away!” Khalid chortled, taking a bite from his own piece of meat and then swigging down another gulp of wine. “I think w, w, we deserve it.”

“That’s my opinion too,” Harry chuckled, although he was looking at the older man worriedly. This worry coalesced when he offered Minsc some wine, and the big man agreed readily, downing half of the pot volume of the bottle to Khalid's anguished cry of ‘hold on there!’ “Um, since we are in a dungeon, I don’t think...”

Glaring at her husband, Jaheira hissed out something in a lilting flowing language that Harry had not heard before, but which he assumed was Elvish. Khalid glanced down at the wine and sighed before nodding, and setting aside, digging into the meal more as he stoppered the bottle and set it aside.

Harry had to make two more slices of deer meat for himself and for Minsc, and one more for the others. They also ate through all of their bread before all of them are satisfied. “We’re going to have to restock almost entirely when we get to Nashkel,” Harry scowled. “I still have a lot of my spices, but we’re down to the dregs in terms of jerky and everything else.”

Jaheira did not look worried by this. Nor did Imoen, being too busy laughing, while Jaheira was trying to stop Minsc from once more jamming the last bit of deer meat into Dynaheir’s mouth. “That is not the way to cure malnourishment, you oaf!”

By the time Harry was finished cleaning up after the meal and Jaheira had convinced Minsc not to simply feed his Witch until she burst, Imoen had found the wine, sampling it a bit herself as she tossed out her bedroll by the fire laying out to one side of Dynaheir and Minsc. Wordlessly Harry left the others around the fire pit, moving to the doorway and laying out his bedroll there before peeling off off his chain mail and setting it down to one side. Imoen

noticed this even through the haze of drink, and she sighed, before deciding to leave the half-elf couple and the two Rashemani to their own devices, moving after her cousin/brother, whatever.

After finally convincing Minsc she knew what was talking about in terms of what food to feed a malnourished woman, whatever his fellow barbarian rangers might think, Jaheira then had to she persuade Minsc that no, he didn't need to stay up all night to watch his Witch and that it was perfectly acceptable for him to lay out next to her instead. "You may sleep sword in hand, Minsc, in fact, I encourage it. But your staying awake all night is not necessary."

"Hmm... Jaheira might not speak kindly, but Minsc supposes she has a point. Very well. But if aught should threaten Dynaheir now that Minsc and Boo has found her, they will face my sword and Boo's teeth!" Minsc whisper-roared, an odd linguistic feat.

Rolling her eyes, Jaheira took a step back, looking over to where her husband was sitting with his back against the same broken pillar where he had put his armor down on, staring down at his hands morosely. She winced at that, shaking her head internally. Jaheira knew what he was feeling, but she really didn't think Khalid had any reason to feel so bad. *After all, it was I who had decided they had to go after that possible slaving ring. It was I who led them into the maw of that sorcerer. If anyone should feel guilty or humiliated, it is me.*

But for all his quiet attitude normally, Khalid took a great deal more pride in his combat abilities than Jaheira, and this latest adventure seemed to have cut him to the quick. *Not that he is alone in that, if not for the same reason, she thought angrily, looking back towards Dynaheir. I should be able to raise the dead! I should be able to bring back our brethren, to call upon nature's judgment more often, to heal Dynaheir fully despite all the spells I have spent this day! And yet I can do none of those. We are but shadows of what we were.*

Jaheira's eyes flicked over to where Harry laid out, her mind going through the same mental processes that her husband's had. *And yet, despite doing what he can to protect us even now, methinks that Harry is taking this battle just as hard as we are if not for the same reasons.* She moved after him for a moment, then shook her head as a yawn burst forth. *No. If the youth is still feeling dismayed by how well he performs tomorrow, I will speak to him then with my husband at my side. Right now, perhaps sleep will do him more good than any words I might impart.* Jaheira was many things, but blind to her own fault was not one of them.

With that, she moved over to her husband, wrapping an arm around his shoulders as he did the same to her waist, leaning in for a moment of comfort as they began to talk quietly in Elvish before they joined the others in slumber.

Your party has slept for eight hours.

Note, due to sleeping on a hard floor and in a dungeon moreover, health points recovered through sleep have been halved. Spells level four and above have not been re-memorized by the party's spellcasters.

This time Harry didn't even remember falling asleep. He simply laid out on his bedroll, and then was blinking his eyes at the notification. *Huh, I wonder if that carries over to Jaheira since she isn't technically part of my party.*

He felt Imoen stirring nearby and could hear Minsc muttering something to Boo elsewhere. A moment later, Khalid grumbled out, "I d, do, don't think I will e, ev, ever get used to t, t, that." Jaheira first slept on, even as her husband left her side, groaning loosely and shaking his head with a chuckle.

He moved over to Harry, who had also stood up by this point, slapping the young human companionably on the shoulder. "We, w, well I just found out t, t, that Imoen was telling the t, t, truth about your ability t, t, taking away hangovers. Please do n, n, not use this power for e, e, evil. Being able to d, d, drink to excess a, a, and not feel it, that is t, t, too strong a force to allow f, f, free in the world."

Harry smiled wanly at that, having noticed that Khalid was drinking last night. Still, he felt that the man, or at least Jaheira, had a handle on it and wasn't about to stick his nose in there. "I'll try not to, I guess. Not that I can see all that many people joining my party in the future, so I doubt that is an issue, really."

Hearing her friend's dry, almost glum voice, Imoen groaned, glaring up at Harry from where she had sat up in her bedroll. "All right, Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry shrugged. "Everything? I lead us into a death trap. It was only luck that got us out of this, and our ability to take those last group of gnolls from above and create a killing ground. If we hadn't been able to do that, if that Gnoll Chieftain had been ready for us when we entered his throne room, if the Gnoll Chieftain had simply retreated and sent his summoned creatures after us or if the gnolls had been able to surround us with that last group, we would've all died. We weren't ready for this campaign."

Minsc guffawed, raising a fist to the ceiling. "Ah, but that did not happen! Instead, Harry, Minsc and their companions won through into a great battle worthy of a song! A warrior does not think about the past! Think of your mistakes, perhaps, learn from them, but always face forward! After all, how can you do the butt-kicking of evil without seeing where it is in front of you?"

"W, w, while I would not p, p, put it as our ebullient f, f, friend did, he is right H, H, Harry," Khalid said, using the hand he had used to slap Harry's shoulder to grip it now. "We h, ha, had no idea what w, w, we were getting into, a, a, and once we did, w, w, we were committed. And without y, y, you leading us, w, w, we would not ha, have won at a, a, all."

Harry shook his head stubbornly, trying to take the blame of the near-disaster on himself still. "That doesn't mean that I was right to lead us in here. We should never have come here as haphazardly as we did. I don't regret doing so, given we did rescue Dynaheir, but it was

far too close. I think it's a lesson to me, a lesson I need to start making longer-term decisions with my head, not with my heart."

"Such is the way of wisdom, Harry, but do not let your head make all your decisions for you," Jaheira interjected, opening her eyes to glare around at the others, having been woken by Minsc's bellow. She sat up, creaking and groaning a little, but was up on her feet quickly enough, staring at Harry. "My husband spoke the truth. Without you and your abilities, your tactics and the bonuses they gave your companions and your allies such as me, we would've lost this small campaign. Do not doubt it."

She shook her head, sending the beads in her hair to clicking very gently. "Further, one cannot always choose one's battles. If we had not come here, Dynaheir would possibly have died by the time we could return here from Nashkel, or been taken by this Master that the gnolls were serving. Leadership, like any ability, takes time and experience. So long as you learn the proper lessons from it, you will better serve yourself and your followers. We did well here. Leave it at that."

Harry stared at her then over to Khalid, then nodded slowly. But before he could say anything, Imoen cut in, hopping to her feet as she pointed dramatically at Jaheira. That had been enough doom and gloom for one morning, thank you. "What's this, kind words from Jaheira!? The sky must be falling."

Jaheira glared at the girl while Khalid began to smirk, looking over at his wife. "You s, s, should take my w, w, wife's words to heart, Harry. Did you know, J, Jaheira was almost a l, l, leader once as well? A D, D, Druid Grove that we had h, h, helped face a, call it an insurrection o, o, of its members a, a, attempted to vote her into office as h, h, High Druid. She would have n, n, none of it b, but..."

"We agreed to never speak of that!" Jaheira shouted, a flush suffusing her features.

As Imoen joined in on the teasing of the suddenly off-balance Jaheira, Harry shook his head, laughing quietly to himself and moving around them to the embers of last night's fire, which had burned through the night, warming the room and keeping the shadows at bay. It did nothing about the smell, however, and Harry was suddenly looking forward to fresh air.

First, food. The group didn't have much left, but Harry could give them something for breakfast, at least. *Although we'll probably be subsisting on the Druids kindness once we get to the Grove. Oh, but wait, there's the pond there too. Alright, that lets me use the rest of our meat now.*

With that in mind, Harry used the last of the jerky, softening it in a stew pot, before chopping it into pieces, making a hearty soup of it, much like what had been fed to Dynaheir the night before only chunkier. Jaheira came over and took some of the soup, straining out those chunks, before once more feeding some of it to Dynaheir. "Does Dynaheir still have the Hungry status, Harry?"

Harry looked over at the woman, then shook his head. "It's disappearing, which is kind of interesting. The status name was in bright red, but now it's in orange."

"Excellent. Now let us see what we can do for the rest of Dynaheir's wounds." Handing the bowl over to Minsc with an admonishment to go slowly and to watch the woman's throat to make sure that she was swallowing before pushing in the next spoonful of soup into her unresponsive mouth, Jaheira bent over the woman's ankles, and then her hands. Three minor healing spells later, Dynaheir's fingers were healed as were her ankles. But she still made no sign of waking up. "Which is possibly for the best. Again, minds are tricky things."

"Yes, but it does leave us with a problem. Minsc, do you think you can carry her? For however long it takes us to get to Nashkel from here?"

"Friend Harry asks a silly question. Minsc can carry Dynaheir easily. His Witch is as light as a feather, as is a must for any witch!" Minsc shouted at the top of his lungs, moving his hands under Dynaheir and making to stand up to elucidate the point. This caused her rags to slip more, showing an indecent amount of cleavage and mocha-colored thigh.

Jaheira's warning hiss caused Minsc to back away slightly while Boo bit at his ear, and she shook her head. "We will create some kind of backpack to put her in, that will have to do," she muttered, shaking her head. "One that keeps her head upright and not moving. Just letting it flop around would not be good for Dynaheir's mind."

"Besides," Imoen quipped, staring down at the other woman. "I rather doubt she is that light, not with curves like that, Minsc. Something you'd notice right away with her on your back."

Jaheira rolled her eyes, then without looking, pointed a finger at her husband, who coughed and turned away quickly. Harry was already looking away but now clicked his fingers. "Imoen, repair her clothes!"

Imoen blinked, then facepalmed. "I'm a bloody idiot."

A second later, the previously almost unclothed woman was now much more sedately clothes, and Harry had one more friendship or respect and trust points from everyone there. The note, however, bemused him somewhat.

Due to your forethought and kindness, you have won 50 friendship points with Minsc, Khalid and Imoen.

You have won 60 trust points with Jaheira, but not respect for some reason. Women are a highly unusual type of creature. This one more so than most.

You have lost 100 man points. Seriously, covering up that view, what is wrong with you?

"What're man points?" he asked the room.

“T, t, this is the f, f, first I’ve heard of them?” Khalid answered, shaking his head quizzically and looking at the younger man. “Why?”

“I just won friendship and respect points with all of you and lost one hundred man points.”

“I am still of two opinions about you seeing such, but since you have never tried to manipulate your actions to gain more such, I will not belabor my misgivings. Beyond that, as long as you do not in point of fact change into something else at losing so many points, I believe that your advanced adventurer system is poking fun at you, as you say it occasionally does,” Jaheira observed before looking around them. “Now, I think we need to loot this area, and then move on.”

It amused Harry how easily Jaheira, who was undoubtedly a very upright, moral individual, talked about looting in this context. But she did have a point, so Harry moved over to the corpse of the Dungeon Boss. After the battle against the Gnoll Chieftain had finished, Harry had left most of the items he had seen on the corpse, being unwilling to add still more to his Item Box when he was already working under the heavily encumbered status change.

His caution on that was proven correct a moment later, as, after Harry dismissed a flashing notice about having become fully encumbered, Harry couldn’t even turn around to address the other people in the room. “My Item Box is completely full, and I’m overweight on it,” he informed them all. “I um, I can’t move.”

The more experienced adventurers quickly hurried over, Minsc shouting, “Then put one of our dead companions in my Item Box friend Harry. I, too, can access it much more easily now that I am a part of your party.”

“In, indeed, t, t, that is one of the best things t, to me about being in your p, p, party in the first p, pl, place,” Khalid joked.

Harry shook his head. “You’ll be carrying Dynaheir. No way am I going to take away from your ability to care for your Witch, Minsc.”

Minsc paused at that while Boo squeaked in his ear, then nodded firmly. As Harry saw that his friendship points now had risen to the point they had been at before Harry convinced Edwin to join them. “Friend Harry is correct! My enthusiasm for helping got in the way of keeping my eyes on the prize as Boo puts it. But what would you have me do? For truly, I am stronger by far than friend Khalid.”

“T, t, truly,” Khalid murmured with a nod, glancing to the side at the large barbarian.

Harry snorted and motioned Minsc to keep coming towards them. “In that case, there are a few things in here I want to identify before handing off. In particular, there is an unidentified chest plate that I want to see if we can repair. After that, Khalid, we’ll see to your armor too.”

“I suppose I will heal you up afterward as well,” Jaheira scowled, making a note to once more shift her memorized spells to include more healing spells and fewer offensive spells. She hadn’t done so last night, being so exhausted, but if she kept traveling with Harry and Imoen, it would no doubt become necessary. That would leave her with few offensive spells at all, but that couldn’t be helped. “Your blood magic spells are insanely useful items, true aces in your hand which can change any battlefield. Yet their impact on your health is something we need to watch most carefully.”

Harry thought about it, then looked over at the others in his party. Besides Jaheira, he could see their health bars, and he shook his head with a sigh. “No. Pass out the others to Minsc, Khalid and Imoen. Even after repairing this thing, I should be fine.” Repair cost pretty much the same for anything, something that he had Imoen had tested in the tutorial, a -30 to health. With that, Harry estimated he would be at a little less than half health, which was fine.

Jaheira looked at him, then nodded once and moved over swiftly to her husband, who smiled in gratitude as many of his bruises and his battered shoulder were healed under her gentle touch.

You have earned + 5 Respect and Trust points with Jaheira.

Every little bit helps, maybe?

Minsc and Imoen murmured their thanks in turn as Harry turned his attention to the loot that they had taken. After that, I would come looking at all of the messages that had been accumulating in his message box. Harry had just been too mentally fatigued last night to go through them and had stuck them down into one of the corners of his vision until he could read each message in turn.

“Okay,” he announced after a moment. “This reads as a chest plate +1.” The item in question was the battered, torn armor that Harry had found on the Gnoll Chieftain’s body after the fight. The full message about it read:

Chest Plate +1

A simple, magically enhanced chest plate, this piece of armor gives the wearer plus one to his defensive stats. In particular, being a chest plate, it will help protect against critical hits or backstabbing better than the normal chest plate it appears physically.

You might want to do something to delouse it, though, given what was wearing it recently.

Warning: Durability 0/100. This piece of armor is too damaged to wear.

“It might have been what that boss monster was wearing, but there’s nothing here that a repair spell won’t put right. Well, that, and a delousing along with a bit of lavender-infused water will do wonders.”

He dropped the armor plate on the floor then held out a hand over it, already noticing how he was no longer encumbered. That was something to keep an eye on in the future for certain. *If that had happened mid-battle, it would've been disastrous. "Repairo!"*

The chest plate twisted and squealed most disconcertingly, and both half-elves clapped their hands to their ears, grimacing in pain. But eventually, it was restored to its proper shape without any tears, and 20 out of 100 durability. Relaying that, Harry shrugged. "I think that's the best we're going to get. The effects of the repair spell depended on how damaged the repair being item being repaired already was. Still, Minsc, it should do well for you once we delouse it."

"No! Friend Harry should take it." Minsc objected instantly.

Harry chuckled. "I can't take it just now without being encumbered, but you might end up keeping it anyway, Minsc. There are two other items in here that I have to Identify first, though."

"Truly? Three items that need Identification is a great prize." Jaheira observed.

"Not when you compare the cost of the feeding this dungeon to it," Harry shot back grimly, causing Jaheira to wince before he looked at the next item. These were heavy leather bracers, which had two large crystals bedded into the outer surface of them.

"Bracers of armor +1 as well," he explained aloud. "They don't have to be repaired although their durability is only 16 out of 100. Could a blacksmith be able to repair them both more than my repair spell, do you think?"

"C, c, certainly, although I would w, w, wager their prices for such w, w, work have r, r, risen during this iron o, o, ore issue," Khalid answered, shrugging. He was about to add that Harry should give those to Imoen, as her being a thief meant she couldn't wear armor heavier than reinforced leather jerkin. However, Harry was already tossing them to her, causing Khalid to smile.

"It was either you or Jaheira, and you're in more danger with your role as a scout, Imoen," Harry explained.

Jaheira nodded firmly, sharing a smile with her husband, and Harry noticed idly that he had gotten another five points in respect and trust for her, and friendship with Khalid.

The next item was a potion of health but not a good one.

Impure Potion of Health +10.

Warning: impurities will cause negative reactions.

A health potion made by someone who didn't quite get it right, this potion will heal you for ten health points. But it will also cause a minor status change.

It is unknown what kind of status change, but the choices include: vomiting, shitting, seeing pretty colors, believing you can fly and wishing to attempt to do so right away, losing all taste or smell for an indeterminate amount of time, and more.

In other words, drink at your own risk, and only if it is a matter of life and death.

Hearing Harry explain this, Jaheira winced. “Ah. Khalid and I have come across numerous examples of potions that have not been brewed correctly. My advice would be to either sell it to an unobservant merchant or use it only if your life is on the line. I know I will not be using it regardless of the circumstances.”

“The last such p, p, potion she was forced to use, turned Jaheira’s hair a muddy brown color,” Khalid explained out of the corner of his mouth.

“Was that any better than the one that turned your skin bright orange?” Jaheira questioned tartly, causing Khalid to wince.

Ignoring their byplay for the moment, Harry looked around the room, then gestured for Imoen to scout around. “Let’s see if there are any hidden treasures to be had.”

Imoen nodded, closing her eyes as she activated the detect traps skill. When she opened her eyes, the world had shifted, the throne of the Dungeon boss glowing dark red now to her senses. Moving in that direction, Imoen munched on the Grapes of Insight to give her intelligence-based abilities an extra kick.

Even so, Imoen nearly failed to disarm the trap, her fingers moving this way and that, with little picks working at the lock as she tried to unlock the little alcove hidden under the throne without setting it off. Eventually, Imoen breathed in with delight as her attempts finally succeeded. “Madame Barca was right, I did need more practice on unlocking things,” she grumbled, before lifting the top of the throne clear of the hidden alcove, staring in delight at what was within.

Within was a pouch of gold, containing, she discovered after a moment, two thousand gold. The second item within was a set of ten emeralds. There was also a sword in there, and after making sure there wasn’t another booby-trap, Imoen stood back and gestured Harry to pick it up as she turned to ask the more experienced adventurers, “What are emeralds worth?”

“Those are extremely expensive. I wouldn’t be surprised if we could make 1,500 gold for each gem from any reputable buyer,” Jaheira exclaimed, looking stunned.

Harry barely heard them as he was busy looking at the longsword that had been hidden within the throne somehow. It was built much like Khalid’s, double-bladed, the blade forty-inches long. There was enough space for one hand on the hilt and a pommel that had a place for a stone, four steel tines leading from the bottom of the hilt, but which did not actually have a stone in there at the moment. The hilt was guarded by a crossguard that looked golden,

intertwined with bronze of all things. The bronze for several things that almost looked like the runes or some odd ancient kind of Scripture.

Longsword +1, +?

At first glance, this is a simple longsword +1. But there are a few strange points to consider as you look at it. For one thing, it's durability is extremely high for a weapon found in a dungeon, 90 out of 100. For another, it has a place for a gemstone to be set into the hilt, but no actual stone. It could be that this weapon is incomplete in its current form, having lost some extra magical item that could give it even more magically enhanced strength.

Harry explained this to the others, and Khalid whistled as he moved over to stare at the sword. Harry handed it to the man, who put it through its paces, the sword flashing this way and that, as he moved through a series of cuts and thrusts, before raising it into the guard position, nodding cheerfully as he flipped the blade in his grip, holding it by its cross guard as he handed it back to Harry. "It's an e, e, excellently forged b, b, blade. The balance is in, in, incredible, well beyond most every day l, l, longswords you could find for fifteen gold p, p, pieces. But b, b, beyond that, and the w, w, whole +1, I can't tell y, y, you what other m, m, magics might be upon it if y, y, you found the right gemstone."

"Do you want to use it, Khalid?" Harry asked. Khalid was easily the best swordsman among them. Not only did he have four skill points in the longsword, but Khalid was also a past master of all the little skills that Harry was only slowly learning under his tutelage. It just made sense to Harry to give him the blade.

But Khalid shook his head, chuckling. "T, t, thank you for the offer H, H, Harry, but I am used to m, m, my own weapon. I w, w, would sooner ask e, e, either you or Imoen to k, k, keep on repairing my blade as y, y, you have for as long a, a, as we travel t, t, together."

With a nod, Harry took Khalid's blade of longsword +1, +4 to defense, and noticed with a wince that during the battle against the gnolls the sword's durability had taken a massive hit, pairing it down to 22 out of a hundred. Staring at it, Harry placed one palm on the side of the blade, the other hand on the crossguard as he intoned, "Repairo!"

This spell hit his health points again as his bar dropped a further fifteen points, putting him at the just above a fourth of his health of 120, and he gritted his teeth. But the sword was repaired once more to 100 out of 100, it's edge gleaming in the light of the fire that Harry had previously used for breakfast.

Handing the blade back to Khalid, Harry looked over at Minsc, smirking. "So you see, my big friend, you do end up with the Chest Plate +1. And I take the longsword."

Minsc boomed out a laugh, grabbing Khalid and Harry both in a bear hug. "Truly, you are a most magnanimous leader! And you Khalid, a man of rare wit and ability! We must spar at

some point. Your abilities with a longsword are impressive even to one from the shores of Rasheman!”

“T, t, thank you, my large f, f, friend,” Khalid replied as Harry simply laughed aloud, throwing an arm around the larger man’s shoulders in turn. “B, b, but if y, y, you expect to spar w, w, with me at any point, I w, w, would like my ribs to r, r, remain in o, o, one piece.”

As Minsc released them, Harry frowned, thinking. “Given what you said about price hikes, I think I’m going to keep this weapon for special occasions as a reserve. For my main weapon, I’ll switch to my warhammer. That at least hasn’t broken on me yet.”

Placing the longsword in his item box, Harry looked over to Imoen, who was practically bouncing on her feet, her eyes gleaming as she looked at Harry. “The lootings done with, come on, let’s get over on with it! Give me those sweet stat points, baby!”

“All right, all right,” Harry laughed, looking around at the others. Even Jaheira, the only one there who wasn’t part of Harry’s party - he didn’t count Dynaheir as she was unconscious - looked interested.

Sifting through the messages, Harry got to the gold ones, the most important ones and began to read them out.

Congratulations!

Due to how many tactics and formations you have used and created to overcome your enemies, your **Tactics** skill has risen to level 3.

As a level 3 Tactician, you can choose **Specialties**.

These are passive additions to your more commonplace abilities or your own tactics and informational abilities. Choose two specialties from the choices below.

Greater Observation,

Unit Cohesion,

Favored Tactics

Mapmaker

Click on each passive ability to gain an insight into what each specialty does.

“O, only Tactics?” Khalid wondered after Harry explained this to them. “Th, there is n, n, not one for l, l, Leadership?”

“Well, there are still only three of you in my party,” Harry shrugged. “No offense Jaheira. I just don’t think I’ll get more leadership levels until the number of people in my actual party as the Advanced Adventurer System terms it.”

“None taken,” Jaheira waved one hand through the air. “I am what I am, scars and all.”

Harry glanced at her, the tiny scars on her face and neck as he wondered if she meant those, or more mental ones, before deciding that right now was not the time to ask. If there ever would be a time for a conversation so personal, anyway. “Anyway, I’m going to assume that tactics just go up like a normal level ability. Leadership is probably more directly connected to how many people I have in a party.”

With that, he read about each of the new skills he could learn, lips pursing in thought. “I’m going to want everyone’s opinions on these. I have my own thoughts, obviously, but I know I’m not the most experienced here.”

“Perhaps, but your lack of experience certainly didn’t hold you back in this campaign,” Jaheira ruefully shook her head. “However, if you want words of wisdom, we are here for you.”

After relaying the titles of the four choices, Harry went on. “Favored Tactics seems the most straightforward. It simply will give me a buff to a formation or tactics I routinely use. Greater observation simply changes my existing Observation ability to include being able to read the terrain, read maps better and...” Harry blinked okay, having gotten this far before speaking aloud to the others. “It also will allow me to see the level of some people who I normally wouldn’t be able to given my own, and the level of any dungeons or respawn points.”

“““That one,””” every voice there bar Minsc shouted, and he was only a second behind everyone else. Then he added, “Boo would also be most interested in what Unit Cohesion is. Cohesion is a word we have not heard before.”

Reading that off, Harry rubbed at his lightning bolt scar in thought. “I think that’s just for all-around tactics and formation fighting. With that, the party would all fight together like we were trained to do so regardless of what formation we take. It’s a +5% to Cohesion, but like the Favored Tactic, it’s passive.”

“And Mapmaker?” Jaheira asked intently.

“Enlarges the map and gives a bit more information on what I can see on it. But everyone’s agreed that Greater Observation should be the first one I choose?”

Everyone did agree on that one, but after that, the discussion broke down, trying to choose between either Favored Tactic or Mapmaker. With the small nature of their band, the formations and tactics that Harry had already used were probably all they were going to be able to use the future. The most versatile one was probably the one the AAS called Hammer Time, and Khalid pushed for it strongly, while Jaheira remained silent, thinking.

Harry though had thought Unit Cohesion would be a good idea, but after Khalid and Minsc opined on it, realized that until there were more of them, they really didn't need Unit Cohesion all that much. And indeed, given the fluid nature of the battlefields adventurers normally faced, it might not be necessary at all.

Jaheira eventually broke into the discussion, asking Harry, "Harry, your map, when we were in the dungeon fighting our way through, did Imoen and Minsc not also spread the boundaries of it, pushing back what you all called the fog of war?"

Harry nodded, then his eyes widened as he realized what she was getting at. "Of course! If Mapmaker carries over, then coupled with my scouts," he nodded toward Imoen "ability to sneak around, it would mean they'd be able to notice a lot more things without endangering us all."

At that, Khalid instantly changed his tune, and Harry eventually agreed too. Knowledge was power. The more knowledge you could have of your enemies, the better you could plan.

Harry clicked on those choices and instantly noticed a better ability to understand the terrain around him. He could pick out places where thieves could hide more easily in the room, cover, half cover, what bits of rubble were flammable, things that could be used as stationary defensive points, both entrances into the building - which obviously he could already see - and how to bring them down. He shook his head to clear it, then went on.

"Imoen, you leveled up, yes. Your next level is well away. You're not even a sixth of the way there, but that's understandable. So, where do you want me to put your stat points?"

Imoen's lips twisted into a moue as she had Harry pull up her full status sheet for a second. "Put the skill point in daggers when we get there. I am not going to be a front-line in your face fighter whatever happens, and I already have a point in short sword, so another secret stabby-type weapon might be a good idea. As for the skill points, put one point in dexterity, that'll help with traps and long-range weapons. Two more in strength, I have to get that up. Then put the last one in charisma."

Having been nodding along up to that point with Imoen's choices, Harry paused, finger in midair from where he was about to allocate the last level up stat point. "Wait, why charisma?"

"I've been thinking about it, and, well, you remember how I was able to use my Flirty Little Lass ability? If I level up my charisma, I wager I might be able to use that in combat. We're not always going to be fighting beasts after all," Imoen replied. Imoen had decided to stop pining for her Metamorph ability. Once it came back to Imoen, she would be ecstatic, but until that point, Imoen had to concentrate on what she could do for the party right now.

Harry scratched at his lightning bolt scar again, then shrugged. "Your body your choice, I suppose."

“Thank you, Harry, you would be astonished at how many men don’t get that,” Imoen replied, causing Jaheira to chuckle, and for the three men to look at one another in confusion.

Harry looked over at Minsc and informed him that he had gained quite a bit of experience points as well and that he was about a fifth of the way to his next level. Minsc nodded agreeably at that, and Harry turned to Khalid, saying, “Your experience gains are invisible to me though. All I can see is a message saying, ‘XP gain is impossible due to the Curse of the Dread One’.”

Khalid sighed, deflating slightly. “That d, d, doesn’t surprise me at all, Harry. N, n, neither my wife nor I h, h, have been able to level u, u, up, or indeed ch, ch, change our stats positively in a, n, any way beyond p, p, potions since we were c, c, cursed.”

“Ouch,” Harry said, shaking his head. “And here I was hoping that if you gained a level, I could assign you some points that would help offset what you all had lost.”

“That would take a great many status points,” Jaheira replied drolly. “Especially considering that we only get three per level, with one point going into dexterity due to our elven heritage. Whereas you and Imoen apparently get four. Something I’m still astonished by, just as much as I’m astonished by the whole ability to actually put them where you wish rather than having them being assigned either by race or by the action that caused you to level up in the first place.”

Harry shrugged at that. After all, there was really nothing he could say to that, although he did note Jaheira didn’t sound jealous, simply amused. Imoen, however, was quick to say, “Is it enough to make you think about wanting to become a Bhaalspawn yourself? I have to warn you, we do have these tendencies to think about killing everyone in our sleep to deal with. It’s enough to drive you mad, I tell you. Mad!”

Everyone there just looked at her until Boo finally squeaked in Minsc’s ear, and Minsc nodded sagely. “Minsc agrees, Boo. Imoen would be more likely to talk, tease or tickle someone to death than murder them in their sleep. Boo thinks that even if you weren’t lying, Bhaal would not find any purchase in your teasing and upbeat soul.”

“Point for Minsc!” Harry chortled, watching Imoen blush a little and look away as the other two agreed with him.

Shaking his head at her antics, Harry moved on to his own level up screen. “I leveled up too,” he said, smiling slightly. Harry had leveled up after the fight at the Friendly Arm Inn, whereupon he had put one point into strength, two into durability, and one in wisdom. Now, Harry decided to assign these new points to his weakest areas.

Luck got two points. After all, luck was important, no matter how wild and crazy it might be, and at least this way, he could offset the negative effect of Potter Luck when it bit him in the rear, as it no doubt would. Intelligence and dexterity both got one point as well, and Harry

went on to put a skill point into Warhammer. “After all, my weapon and shield combo is already maxed out, as are my longsword skills.”

Before Khalid could say anything, Harry turned to them and wagged a finger. “And yes, I know that doesn’t mean there isn’t room for improvement, it’s just that such improvements won’t come automatically from leveling up. And this way, I can use my Warhammer as my primary weapon for a bit without any loss in ability, saving that sword for special occasions, like I mentioned earlier.”

With that, he closed the level up screen, staring at his overall status screen as Imoen did the same. They then looked at their stats side by side, along with Khalid and Minsc.

Class: Thief level 6

Strength: (8)

Willpower: (4) +4

Dexterity: (20)

Constitution: (6)

Durability: (4)

Wisdom: (10)

Charisma: (7)

Intelligence: (22)

Luck: (11)

Class: Paladin level 7

Strength: (20)

Willpower: (11) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (17)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (12)

Wisdom: (9) + 7

Charisma: (11) +4

Intelligence: (9) +11

Luck: (10) +/- 4

However, leveling up to Level 8 was far, far away, even worse than it was for Imoen. Harry had barely any experience showing on the experience bar to it, and the number at the end was so daunting that he didn't even bother looking, simply closing the screens and looking around at the others. "Now that all of the maintenance and looting is done, do you think we can get the fuck out of this fortress?"

"Here here!" Shouted every voice there.

The group made their way out of the fortress, although it was slow going because Khalid insisted they stop to harvest the dead gnoll's ears. Like bandit scalps, they could be exchanged at most towns for gold. And with all the supplies they had gone through, they would need all the gold they could get.

As they were heading across the bridge, Harry was going through his old journal entries, frowning. "Hmm... huh, it might be because of my Greater Observation skill, but the message about us beating the dungeon changed to calling it a Class Four dungeon."

Jaheira, Minsc and Khalid all stopped walking, turning to stare at him in surprise. "That is amazing!" Minsc bellowed. "A Class Four dungeon would normally need a band of twenty low-ranking adventurers to clear, or even a group of mid-rank adventurers!"

"Indeed. If I had known that before..." Jaheira wearily sighed, making a throwaway gesture with one hand. "Bah, what's done is done. But that, if we can tell such things ahead of time, that is going to be an incredibly useful tool."

"Then I guess we all made the right decision there, didn't we," Harry teased, causing her to laugh.

The trip back to the Elder Dryad's Grove was uneventful, something all of them were very happy for. Although none of them had any bruises or injuries that would slow them down, thanks to Jaheira's healing, they were all hurting. Harry and Khalid and Minsc were around the same in terms of overall health, Minsc having taken more injuries during the battle but having ignored them due to his high level of endurance. Imoen had slightly more health than either of them in terms of her health bar, but actually less than the warrior types given her Thief nature. The only one who was really in fighting shape was Jaheira, and she was in no way a frontline combatant.

As they reached the Druids Grove, Harry was musing aloud on that, his musings ending with, “even though she swings a mean staff.” Occasionally Jaheira had had to swing her staff defensively once or twice, and he had seen her put down gnolls and xvarts alike.

“And don’t you forget it, young one.” So saying, Jaheira halted on the pathway leading up to the Druids Grove, frowning at them all. “Realize before we go up there that Dryads are fickle at times. This one seems a bit more intelligent than most of the breed, thanks to her advanced age. However, remember that she did say that she hoped for a repeat performance,” she began obliquely, “and that both of her... performers... are no longer with us. I have no idea how that is going to go over.”

“Are you saying that Harry here might have to take one for the team?” Imoen laughed, her eyes lighting up with the amount of teasing material this could give her.

Harry groaned while Khalid joined Imoen in laughing at his expense. Minsc did not join them, not getting the joke really, and too busy carrying Dynaheir on his back. The man had kept up despite her weight throughout the day, a feat of strength that demanded respect.

True to Jaheira’s prediction, the Dryad was somewhat annoyed when she took in the new composition of their party, becoming even more so when Jaheira explained to her how Edwin and Garrick had died and were currently being carried within Harry’s Item Box. “Of course, you have sanctuary among my trees. But I feel I must protest, Druid. You take my toys away, and then return with them broken?”

“Still...” she changed her mood on a whim, moving towards Harry, one finger tracing the side of his face to draw and backup. “There is this one. Unless I misread things, and you and he are involved, my dear?” she asked, looking over at Imoen, one eyebrow raised in query.

Imoen laughed and raised both hands, waving them wildly in front of her. “No, no. Our connections familial, nothing like that.”

“Excellent. Then you wouldn’t mind spending the night with me would you, handsome one?” the Elder Dryad’s voice was almost a purr as she turned back to Harry, sidling up to him so that her breasts gently pressed into Harry’s armored chest. Even through the armor and his undershirt, Harry could somehow feel the sensation, and he gulped, before tearing his eyes away.

Elder Dryad has attempted to use Charm.

You have resisted Charm.

Due to your willpower, you have resisted the Elder Dryad’s attempt to befuddle your mind and senses.

But do not think this makes her any less interested in you. In fact, it is the exact opposite.

Women are weird like that.

“I, erm, that is I’m not certain that would be wholly appropriate. I do not know if my current energy level would, um, match your needs,” Harry replied, stumbling over his words as he tried to figure out a way to get out of this while the others looked on in amusement.

The Elder Dryad took a step back, cocked her head thoughtfully as she looked up at Harry. Like Imoen, the Dryad was a head shorter or more than Harry. “That is the second time you have thrown off my Charm. Impressive..” Her full lips, somehow the crimson of an autumn oak leaf, twisted into a sensual smirk. “That just means I will have to seduce you the old-fashioned way. And I do like a challenge...”

Throughout the rest of the night, which they spent in the grove from early evening on, Harry found that the Dryad never moved further away from him than a few feet, making her interest plain in him at every point as they made camp, talked about the battle they’d had against the gnolls, and what the fortress’s destruction might mean for the area around it. As that conversation wound down, Khalid returned with some fish from the lake, and Harry got to work on the meal, with the Dryad hovering close, pressing in, touching his hands, arms and shoulders, bare now that he had removed his armor for the day.

“And what are you doing with those berries in this tiny pan?” the Dryad inquired, licking her lips from tasting the sauce Harry had made to glaze the fish steaks with.

The pan in question was small, made of tin, something Gorion had purchased for the trip, along with many of the other cooking gear Harry carried. Inside, the berries, healing berries, ripe strawberries, and blueberries, swam in a strangely gloopy sauce.

“Um, that is sugar and basil-infused sauce. It’s supposed to add a bit more sweetness to the berries. Then I’ll put them in a pastry. I have enough flour and yeast left for one more party-sized pastry,” Harry explained, flushing to his ears as the Dryad’s large, slightly drooping breasts pushed into his side as she peered over his shoulder.

“Bah. Berries are nature’s sweets as it is.” Dryads didn’t need to eat since they got nutrients from their tree, truly being a part of the tree despite having their own physical form. That didn’t mean she wasn’t intrigued by it, however. “May I try one?”

“Um, sure, one more or less won’t matter much with the amount you gave us all.” Harry turned now, staring at the Dryad in the eye, his face and tone both earnest and thankful. “Thank you for this. We weren’t on our last legs, but we were close. Having a night here, with the number of healing berries you have already given us, that’s enough to make me certain we can make it to our next destination and resurrect our friends.”

The Dryad stared at him for a few minutes, then flushed and looked down, mumbling under her breath, “By the Oak, those eyes are just unfair.” She shook her head, sending her blonde hair swaying this way and that, while she looked back up at Harry. “Do not worry. I would have supplied you with the healing berries at the very least due to your having a druid in your party. The rest, well, having people be here briefly is rather fun for me as well.”

The way she said the word 'fun' made Harry shudder from head to toe, and she smiled before gesturing down to the berries. "Give me one."

Eyebrows furrowing, Harry was confused for a moment before the Dryad opened her mouth, her tongue flicking out for a moment. Realizing now what she meant, Harry looked around for a fork but didn't find one. With a blush, Harry reached down into the gooey mix picking out a blueberry.

He raised it to the Dryad's still open mouth, but before he could just pop it in like he had done occasionally with Imoen when she was taste-testing things for him, she grabbed Harry's hand and leaned forward. Harry's eyes widened in shock, and he felt the earlier shudder return with reinforcements, going down his spine as his thumb and index finger were engulfed in the Dryad's warm mouth. The berry between them was flicked away by her tongue, which then began to lick and swirl around berry and finger alike.

How long this went on, Harry didn't know. It was too much and over too soon, as she leaned away, gulping down the berry and smiling at the taste. "Mmmm, yes. I think I am looking forward to trying whatever you can cook, Harry."

As the evening wore on into the night and the party had what amounted to a minor feast of fish and pastry, Harry got better at flirting back at her, but he never took it to the next level, and the Dryad realized that the boy really wasn't all that attracted to her. Or if he was, he wasn't willing to act on it. Not once did Harry flirt with her unless the Dryad started it first, and never more than verbally.

Finally, as the others began to move away from the cookfire and bed down for the night, she asked bluntly, "Is it because you are a paladin that you attempt to rebuff my advances?"

"N, no," Harry said with a blush. "Or at least, not only that, miss."

"Why then? You are not attached. Indeed, the one girl here that you seem closest to seems to be urging us on. And not exactly subtly either," the Dryad added dryly, looking over to where Imoen was flashing the two of them a thumbs up as she folded out her bedroll under one of the willows lining the bank of the pond. This stopped when Jaheira gently reached over and rapped her on the back of the head. But Jaheira's own by-now amused look, and Khalid's look of equal amusement wasn't doing anything for Harry's sense of propriety.

"I'm just, I don't, well, I'm a..." Harry floundered, embarrassed. Guys were not supposed to admit to this! He didn't know much about guy interaction, certainly not when it came to interaction at the age of his current body, but he knew that for a fact, having heard the ribbing some of the seventh years gave one of their fellows on this topic.

"Ah, is that all?!" The Dryad laughed, shaking her head as a small but somehow calming and tender smile came to her face. "You would not be the first virgin I have laid with. And I am

not looking for something long term, or anything of that nature, my young paladin. In fact, you could think of this as simply you're paying the toll of your time here if you wish."

"That doesn't make it any easier. In fact, that makes it worse," Harry muttered, shaking his head. "This kind of thing should be, well, meaningful."

"I think we are talking of two different definitions of the word meaningful," the Dryad began, frowning a little, then she understood. "You wish to have some kind of emotional connection with your partner."

Harry nodded, blushing brightly and looking away. "Is that so wrong?" he retorted gruffly.

"Not wrong, no, not for your species at any rate. For mine, the idea is highly unusual." Deciding she'd had enough of this, the Dryad stood up abruptly, reaching down and grabbing at Harry's hand, pulling him to his feet. She could feel her core dripping with desire, and it was high time that all of the evening's flirtations come to fruition. "And you are in my grove and should play by my rules. And if you just did not like the idea of paying your time, consider this a learning experience. This way, when you find that partner of yours, you will know what to do. Far too few men truly do."

With that, she stepped in close and kissed Harry. It was soft at first, simply pressing their lips together. Then, as her arms went around him, the Dryad began to feel Harry relax, and she began to deepen the kiss.

Harry got into it quickly. The same ability he had discovered while kissing Valerie came to the fore. This allowed Harry to read the Elder Dryad, kiss her just the way she wanted to be kissed, even as that changed for one second to another.

To her shock, the Dryad began to feel herself responding more as the kiss went on. *The boy is a natural! Oh, I must see how far that innate skill goes!* She pulled back slightly, smiling as she saw Harry's half-lidded, almost stunned look. "Come," she said simply. "Your friends can look after themselves for the rest of the night. You are mine until dawn."

Staring at her, Harry could only nod his head weakly, following behind her as she led the way toward her tree and around to the other side.

OOOOOO

You have rested for seven hours. Due to not resting in a bed...

Grumbling, Harry waved the normal morning message away. The next message however was less easy to ignore:

WOooHOOO! Congratulations!

You have lost your virginity to an Elder Dryad! Very few men alive can say they had the privilege of learning about the mysterious thing called 'sex' as you have. Your knowledge of the female body, what feels good to you and your partner both have risen to new heights. As such, your perception skill has split into two separate skills: Sexual Awareness and Perception.

Sexual Awareness: As you kiss, touch or otherwise interact with your partner, you will be able to notice subtle hints to show you what feels good for the woman or not. You will be able to fine her erogenous zones, and, more importantly, know what doesn't feel good or what makes her uncomfortable.

This skill is a percentage-based skill. You have a 82% chance to guess accurately what really gets your partner going.

Perception: A side-skill of Observation based around personal interaction, Perception allows you to understand a woman's individual tastes. What is she interested in relationship-wise? What are her preferences sexually?

This skill is a percentage-based skill. You have a 35% chance to activate this skill and accurately understand your partner. Once you get to that point anyway. Getting there is another matter entirely.

And just think, you still don't know why Parselmouth will make you so popular with the ladies. (hint, hint)

PS: do not worry. Personal lifestyle abilities, such as anything to do with flirting, cooking, sex or even something as banal as sewing cannot be viewed by anyone but those they pertain to within the party.

Staring at this message was of two minds about it. On the one hand, he was still ambivalent about the morality of tracking relationships and, ahem, personal experiences like this. They seemed too important to treat like a game. But on the other hand, the dryad had said it herself: last night had been about pleasure. Heck she had even said would be a learning experience for him so in that case, seeing results like this was weird, but kind of nice too. Although Harry did wonder why Perception was so low in comparison to his old Perception skill. *Maybe because I haven't actually been in a relationship, not really? I mean, I never went past the flirting stage back in Candlekeep, or kissing with Valerie, and the Elder Dryad agreed that it was just a one night stand.*

"My, that was most satisfying," a female voice murmured, and Harry looked down to see the Dryad laying out on top of him, her head against his chest, her bare breasts pressing into his stomach, oddly bringing to mind once more that this body wasn't Harry's original. As thin as he had been, Harry didn't have a six-pack like this body, certainly not enough of one to twitch under the Dryad's gentle touch. "You weren't nearly as good with your tongue as Edwin, nor as quick to get into things as Garrick was. But you had more self-control than either, and

once we started, your enthusiasm and desire to experiment was fantastic. And your physical... abilities were well beyond their own as well.”

The Dryad smiled winsomely, leaning up to kiss at the underside of Harry’s jaw for a moment. “I don’t suppose that I could convince you to stay here, Harry? I believe the two of us could have quite a bit of fun together for a few years.”

“Erm, I’m sorry, but I have obligations elsewhere, to my party, and to our long-term goal.” Harry felt himself really feeling sorry about that too. Last night had been amazing and very informative too. “Beyond that, my being here might bring danger down on you.”

The woman looked at him in confusion, pushing herself off his chest with a sigh of reluctance, one that Harry found himself feeling as well. He tried desperately to keep his eyes from straining down to those large, full breasts, with their almost inhuman level of softness, but his eyes did slide that way once before he could control himself, something the Dryad noticed but did not comment on. “I am not without strength here in my own grove. “What kind of danger are you speaking of?”

“What do you know of the Time of Troubles?” Harry began. *After all, my being a Bhaalspawn isn’t a big secret, and she certainly isn’t going to be sharing it with anyone else.*

From there, Harry explained what he knew of his origins and the fact that his heritage was known to someone out there, and that it would bring trouble down on those near him. Scowling at that, the Dryad slowly nodded. Even here in her grove, she knew of the time when Gods walked among men, and the horrors that resulted, and she wanted no part of danger on that scale. “In that case, I suppose you do have to leave. I would rather not bring down what will possibly amount to a personal war on my head. Your destiny is elsewhere, and no doubt fraught. But I have one final bit of advice for you, my young paladin.”

The Elder Dryad leaned down and kissed Harry lingeringly almost enough to make Harry think that she wanted another romp. But then she pulled back, stood up, and then gestured down at her body. Harry watched in unashamed awe at that body, which he had gotten to know so well last night, as it suddenly became covered with leaves, clinging to her from the knee up to the neck. Those leaves rustled as she moved, somehow sticking together and to her skin, acting like clothing would. But Harry knew from experience that each leaf could be removed on its own.

“Don’t so serious all the time,” the Dryad went on as if the kiss hadn’t even occurred. “This life can be sweet if you but allow it to be.”

Still staring at her, Harry stood up and nodded, and she waved her hand airily at him. “Go. Your fellows are over where we left them last night. I expect some breakfast from you as well, Harry, as a final farewell.”

When he joined the others, they were all already moving up and about, his three party members having gotten up that he had, going from sleep to awake instantly as the Advanced Adventurer System, or AAS allowed. Jaheira was still looking a little groggy, but she seemed to be waking up quickly, whereas Dynaheir was not, still unconscious. Minsc was feeding her some of the broth left from the soup that Harry had made back in the fortress, his movements almost exaggeratedly gentle as he fed her one spoonful at a time.

Imoen was the first to notice Harry's moving towards them, and she chuckled, waving at him. "Hail the conquering hero!"

Turning to look at Harry, Khalid began a slow clap, while Jaheira simply nodded in Harry's direction, taking note of his incredibly frazzled, bemused appearance.

Harry growled at Imoen, shouldering past her, nearly putting the smaller thief girl on her rear, but this just caused her to laugh all the louder. Pouting down at her, Harry plaintively begged, "Can we just go?"

Shaking her head at her husband and Imoen's continued amusement at Harry's attitude, Jaheira nodded towards the remains of the cooking fire. "Just as soon as we have a meal. Then we must be on the trail soon and pushing ourselves hard. "We have only three days to get to the nearest temple if we wish to revive our comrades."

"Wait, what?" Harry stuttered, blinking in confusion.

Imoen too was looking startled, her humor at Harry's attitude falling away instantly.

"You didn't know?" Khalid was surprised and looking at them in confusion.

Minsc, too, was looking incredulous. "Truly, even Minsc know that there is a limit to how long the soul of a person who has been slain will remain near, able to be contacted and brought back once more. Wait too long, and the soul will go on to its deserved afterlife. In my case, it would be Meilikki's forest, where I would join the Eternal Guard, watching over the land and the spirits within forever. For Garrick as a Bard, perhaps he would wish to play in the halls of the gods?" He paused, then scowled. "And the red priest's soul would go into the darkness, to be judged for his evil. For Garrick, at least, we should hurry."

As ebullient as he is, Minsc is quite correct. The soul will depart this plain permanently within five days of the death of its body. The only exception to the rule would be if the body was petrified. In that case, the individual's soul is trapped within the stone," Jaheira explained.

"This is one of those things everyone knows, so it doesn't have to be written down, isn't it?" Imoen said with a sigh. "We really did miss out on things growing up in Candlekeep, didn't we?"

Jaheira snorted. "Considering you wouldn't have met that interesting jewel maker, or come upon your amazing amount of spices, I believe the negatives and benefits of your having

grown up in Candlekeep even out in the end. And I would also wager that it is indeed written somewhere, just not the kind of books I can see either of you willingly reading.”

“Ask Garrick or Edwin if it does or not ‘even out’ when we revive them, and they learn we didn’t know at first there was a time limit,” Harry replied dryly. “Edwin’s answer to that question would probably not be printable. Regardless, we probably only have two and a half days to get to the nearest priest, which would be in Nashkel, right?” Khalid and Jaheira both nodded at that, having a good idea of most of the geography of the Sword Coast. Even if they hadn’t been active in the area, they had passed through it several times. “So let’s get a move on. I’ll whip us up a quick breakfast, but after that, we keep on without pause unless one of us collapses.”

“In that case, I should use my healing spells upon you and the others rather than husband them less Dynaheir becomes more sickly. We might have to fight through any enemies in our path quickly,” Jaheira scowled. “I dislike the necessity. Beyond that, I think we should plan out our route as well.”

While Harry moved over to the fire to make some more sugared berries to go with a spinach salad with a vinaigrette dressing, Khalid and Imoen began to pack away the bedrolls and everything else. As he was working, Harry also watched as Jaheira began to draw a map of the area as she thought it looked like in the dirt.

“We are here. We actually passed south and west of Nashkel from where we had begun to get to the gnoll fortress. From here, we can make a straight run to Nashkel, although we will be technically within the boundary of Amn for most of the journey. The area here is called Fire Leaf Forest or something of that nature? Something oddly poetic and vainglorious for such a small, tiny, outpost of the mighty forests to the north and east of us.” The half-elf shook her head. “I believe it’s called that because some rich hunters from further south in Amn come out here to hunt occasionally. Regardless, a straight path through these woods will bring us to the western border of Nashkel. I’d estimate if we push on hard, unmindful of the trail we will leave behind, we could get there within a day and a half.”

“Sounds good, but how well do you know the area around here?”

“Not very well, alas, beyond a sense of where we are. My husband and I have been in Amn several times. Indeed we have several friends, both Harpers and none, scattered across it. But unlike Gorion, we have never been active before this in the Sword Coast. We have passed through numerous times, and I know the general geography. But if you are asking for specifics, I can’t help you.”

“But, there’s nothing major like the gnoll fortress between Nashkel and us?”

“Indeed not. That would be disastrous for the town if such a thing existed. Indeed, this fortress is much closer than should have been allowed if Amn had a significant military force nearby.”

“Precisely my point,” Harry replied dryly. He was getting better at that sarcasm and dry wit.

About an hour later, after the dryads once more gifted them with several dozen healing berries and two more Gourds of Power, the party of adventurers moved off.

With speed of an essence, Jaheira was off like a gazelle, with her husband racing beside her through the land toward the forest’s edge, barely visible from here. Harry blinked at how quickly they could move, then shook his head as Imoen muttered something about a ‘Legolas,’ whatever that was, to herself, and raced after them. This left Minsc and Harry to look at one another. “I don’t think they assume we can move that quickly, my friend, but I believe it is time for us to run as well.”

“Indeed! If not for Edwin, then at least for Garrick! His songs might have made Boo’s teeth itch, and he was certainly not the bravest of companions, but he did not deserve to die in the quest to rescue fair Dynaheir,” Minsc agreed.

With that, the two warriors raced after their friends side-by-side, catching up with the others only because the two half-elves slowed down when they reached the forest.

They didn’t keep up the running pace all day, of course. They ran until Minsc and Imoen started to tire, then switched to a normal marching pace, as they ate some of the normal berries and fruits that the Dryad had given them. And of course, Harry had to endure Imoen and Khalid’s jokes at his expense with a red face and a put upon expression.

“Is it just me, or did the Elder Dryad have a very bountiful harvest to share?”

“M, m, my goodness, something put the d, d, dryad in a good mood, I wonder w, w, what it could have been?”

Despite their japes and Harry’s urge to run away from the embarrassment, In this way, they made good time until it started to rain. It was not pleasant, although it didn’t slow them down as much as Harry had feared. Everyone bar Dynaheir had hoods. Her cloak must have been lost somewhere along the way during her captivity.

But Imoen used another new Blood Magic spell, an engorging charm, on Minsc’s cloak. This made the large man’s cloak grow to nearly twice it’s original size, being able to cover both Jaheira and Minsc both from the rain. On the other hand, It hit her health badly, -30 points, and forced Harry to use his Lay on Hands spell on Imoen before the girl could collapse.

As they continued on their way, Harry found himself between Jaheira and Imoen, holding Imoen’s elbow until she got her feet under her. They stayed that way for some time until they came to a tiny stream where Jaheira paused, her elfin ears flicking slightly against the rain as she looked off into the woodlands south of the trail that they had been forging through the forest. “What in the world? Khalid, do you hear that?”

“T, t, the sound of a young voice s, s, shouting on the w, w, wind? I do. S, s, strange to hear it outside in t, t, this weather, so far removed f, f, from civilization. It c, c, could be a trap.”

“Perhaps, but it behooves us to make sure that it isn’t just in case,” Jaheira replied, looking in the direction from which she could make out a distant shout.

None of the others could object to that, so the group moved through the woods, with Harry joining Jaheira in the lead, using his map ability to home in on a green dot as it appeared. Coming into view of the green dot, which was labeled ‘Young Albert’, they found a young boy of around thirteen standing at the edge of a large clearing, shouting out something the humans in their party had to strain to hear over the tumult of rain. “Rufie, come home! I know you can hear me!”

For a moment, Harry could only stare, cocking his head to one side, then he looked around at the others, shaking his head. “What is it with young boys in this day and age? Is someone sort of somehow removing their common sense? First, the kid who was out and about up north who made a habit of spying on bandit attacks, and now this one shouting in the middle of the wilds?”

“Young boys are not known for common sense in any event,” Jaheira chuckled.

Imoen began to laugh, shaking her head and grabbing at Harry’s ear to whisper, “Oh, and you were the model of common sense when you ran after Quirrell down that series of traps the teachers set up to protect the Philosopher’s Stone?”

Harry had the grace to flush at that but replied gamely and in a louder voice as he shifted things around to make up a vague tale that somewhat resembled the adventure he, Hermione and Ron had when they tried to stop the Voldemort possessed Quirell from bringing his master back to life. Whispering might not be enough with two half-elves in their group, after all. “That was different. I thought there was a danger to Candlekeep, that a thief was in our halls. And I was right, wasn’t I?”

“You were, but remember you were only eleven at the time. Don’t go throwing rocks when you live in a glass castle Harry,” Imoen replied, going with the change of story as if the two of them had talked about it ahead of time. She was quick on her feet like that, something Harry always appreciated.

“Good grief, a glass castle? Do you have any idea how expensive that would be?” Jaheira asked jokingly while Minsc added that he would love to see such a thing as it would be truly a sight to see.

“E, e, enough talking! The boy is in danger o, o, out here all alone. Let us s, s, see if we can do something a, a, about that,” Khalid interrupted with a put-upon sigh. Occasionally, he felt that this party tended to lose themselves in dialogue when they should concentrate more

on their surroundings. The fact that he was craving a drink might've had something to do with his eagerness to move on.

"Sure," Imoen said with a shrug, marching out of the woods towards the youngster before any of the others could respond. "Hey kiddo, what are you doing out here? Where're your parents?"

The boy turned, looking at Imoen and the others behind her as they came out of the woods, showing no surprise or concern at their appearance out of the rain-soaked forest. Instead, he simply answered Imoen's question, gesturing vaguely southward or at least the direction Harry assumed was southward, judging by the direction that they had been traveling. "My parents? They are over there somewhere. I will return to them eventually, as soon as I find my dog."

Harry cocked his head, his eyes narrowing under his hood. Something about the youngster's voice and cadence was throwing him off, despite the reassurance of his map telling him the boy was no threat, a true civilian just like the other boy they had met before finding Minsc. The tone just didn't seem to match his outward appearance. And for some reason, that dichotomy set Harry on edge.

The others didn't seem to notice, though, so despite being on a hair-trigger ready to summon his weapons out his Item Box, Harry moved forward to join Imoen as the others did the same.

Yet despite being faced with five adventurers up close and personal, the young boy still didn't seem at all startled or frightened. Indeed he smiled brightly. "Excellent. There are more of you. Could I ask for your help in finding my dog? He is a large black brute named Rufie. My name is Albert."

"We're just adventurers passing through, and you would ask us for help?" Harry asked before anyone else could say anything.

"Yes, I would. If you meant me harm, you would be attacking already, wouldn't you?" the boy answered, smiling as if the idea had never even been a possibility.

This disarmed Harry somewhat, and Imoen spoke up before he could continue his interrogation. "I suppose we can help you find them. Just tell us where you saw him last, and we'll get you and Rufie back to your parents." Imoen answered, thinking they could probably find a road by taking this kid to find his parents. Maybe even a map of the area.

"We were stopped by a small waterfall down that way. Rufie saw something in the forest and went hearing off before I could get out of the water," Albert answered, pointing south and east of their current position.

The adventurers all looked at one another, then sighed and began to move in that direction. Despite Jaheira looking as if she wanted to tan the boy's hide, none of them was the

type to leave him alone. Although Harry was still getting a very uncomfortable feeling around the boy. And as they traveled, that feeling did not go away, causing Harry to be ready to activate his Item Box and bring out his weapons instantly.

They found the waterfall quickly, where Khalid began, and Minsc both picked up the trail of the dog despite the rain and Dynaheir still being carried on Minsc's back. They quickly moved on, with Khalid in the lead, and Jaheira taking up the rear position with Harry falling back too, watching the boy as he walked beside Imoen and Minsc. She looked at him quizzically, only now noticing how tense Harry was. "What is wrong?"

"Something about that young boy is niggling at my senses. I don't know, it's just something off. I think it's something to do with my Greater Observation, but because it isn't something to do with terrain or anything of that nature, it isn't as clear as it should be," Harry confessed.

After studying Harry's face for a moment and realizing he was serious, Jaheira nodded, then very surreptitiously loosened the top of her sling stone pouch while letting the sling itself drop into her hand from where it had been tied loosely around her wrist. She made an odd animal noise for a moment, sounding like a cat almost, but even deeper in tone ending in a bark. This caused Khalid, several hundred yards ahead of them through the forest to twitch his head, looking back at her in confusion, but he didn't reply further, instead simply moving on. "If there is trouble, my husband and I will be ready."

"Signal calls, excellent idea," Harry nodded in approval. "Do you think you could teach the rest of us that call?"

Jaheira smiled at that, then nodded her head slightly. "In the future, perhaps."

Congratulations.

Due to realizing that having some signals to share with your group so you can communicate over distances might be a good idea, you have earned ten Respect points with Jaheira.

You're getting there little by little...

After that, the group ran into a group of undead skeletons around a small battlefield of some kind but easily dealt with them, moving on until the trail they were following entered a small cave. There they found the dog, who came out at Albert's shout of "Rufie, come out here, you big brute!"

The dog was big, for certain, and quite shaggy, looing more like a hunting dog than a boy's pet. It bounded through the rain towards the boy, yipping happily.

At that point, though, things went sideways quickly. The boy and the dog touched, hand to nose, and suddenly both of them started to change, their forms morphing into something else entirely. The dog became a giant beast of some kind, with wide, stooped shoulders, four

arms and two human-like legs, with a mouth that had far too many teeth to be believed. The boy's transformation was less disturbing but just as profound, becoming an ogre of a rather large size, standing at least 3 feet taller than even Minsc.

Before their change had completed, Harry had begun to bark out orders, pulling Minsc and Khalid away from the two, having them spread out. There was a downed tree to one side, and he gestured Minsc and Jaheira to use it as a barricade, while he took one end, the sword he had taken from the throne room in the gnoll fortress in one hand, his tower shield on his other arm. Khalid took the other side of the same downed log.

So spread out, the group could not be targeted by any single magical attack Harry had yet seen, while the downed log was more than tall enough to serve as a makeshift barricade to protect against a charge from the beast. At the same time, Imoen disappeared under Hide-in-Shadows, her ability to do so enhanced by the rain coming down while Minsc, still carrying Dynahier on his back, couldn't. Indeed, he couldn't be involved in any close-quarters combat at all, hence why Harry had him pulled back with Jaheira to provide long-range cover fire.

As the transformation continued, the information Harry saw via his AAS ability changed too, the color of their dots on his map shifting from blue to the orange of possible enemies. Their races also changed, while their names did not.

Name: Albert

Race: Ogre mage.

Class: Level 15 Mage.

Attitude toward you: complete disdain. Like a child looking at an ant, he might decide to step on you or not. Your opinion on things hardly matters at all.

A planar traveler, Albert the Ogre Mage might be able to get lost in a tiny grove of trees, but he is a powerful mage, one not to be underestimated. As a Planar traveler, he has one more spell per level than an equivalent mage who was born on this plane. Expect summoning and teleportation spells.

A page has been added to your bestiary.

Name: Rufie

Race: Level 13 Pit Fiend

Attitude toward you: Depends. If hungry, you look like a tasty meal. Otherwise, something to hunt down and toy with at its leisure.

Rufie is a surprisingly docile member of its race, ostensibly raised by its master since it was young. Do not make the mistake of thinking that makes it any less dangerous. A Pit fiend can utterly demolish low-level or even many mid-level Adventurers.

A page has been added to your bestiary

Quickly using eye movements to open the bestiary page, Harry desperately hoped that the pages would give him some idea of the weakness of these two beings. Because just looking at 'Rufie', Harry knew this wasn't a battle they could win with strength alone.

Race: Ogre Mage.

An offshoot of the ogre race, Ogre Mages are far more intelligent than the other types of ogres out there, with all the abilities of a mage. And unlike ogres, Ogre Mages can serve any of the alignments they wish. Depending on where they come from, their spells can differ wildly from those available to mages of similar levels. The race specializes in invisibility spells and mental magics.

Do not make the mistake of thinking they cannot fight in-close, though. Ogre Mages are still mages and can wield scimitars, katanas or bastard swords as well as any adventurer.

Weaknesses: Ogre Mages do not have any racial weakness beyond a slight weakness to sunlight. They can be overcome eventually through a mix of brute force, keeping them from using magic, and long-range firepower.

The page on the Pit Fiend was much worse.

Race: Pit fiend.

Pit fiends are literal demons of the pit, denizens of Hell, where the Dark Gods dwell each in their own pocket plane. Most have the intelligence dogs, if dogs were habitually vicious and ate the souls of their victims at the same time they ate their flesh. Others can live long enough to be as smart as any human, if without any hint of empathy or morality. Powerful, fast, and with tentacles where others might have whiskers, they are immune to +2 weapons or lower, regenerate 3HP/round, and can attack with claws as well as cast three spells per day.

Weaknesses: Holy magic, God-blessed weapons, and that is about it. Pit Fiends are nasty. They can often be tricked into traps, and their dexterity is abysmal, so holding spells like Tangling Vines can work on them. Beyond that, Silence and long-range weapons are your friends. If you have arrows or whatever of +3 anyway. But hey, once they are stuck, you can run away at least.

"wait for them to attack first!" Harry shouted, hoping this terrible duo would decide they were not worth the trouble but preparing for the worst. "Jaheira, ready tangling Vines, then, if you have it, Silence or something else on the Pit Fiend, while everyone else concentrates on taking down the mage. But do not fire until they attack!"

Once the transformation completed, the ogre turned, but then paused, one hand still on the muzzle of the giant archer as it sat on its haunches beside him. He studied the adventurers, who waited tensely, spells and arrows ready.

After a heart-stoppingly tense moment, he nodded. "You show proper deference and wariness of me, you strange, pitiable creatures who have never been beyond this plane of your own. And I thank you for your help in finding my pet. Lost as I was, I could not make heads or tails of his trail. I am a sophisticated individual, after all, not like one of you dirt grubbers. Now, however, I can at last return. Farewell."

With that, and with no other word spoken, the ogre mage and the pit fiend disappeared, a doorway opening up in front of them both, with each he stepped through closing it behind themselves.

"... What the hell was that?" Imoen shrieked as she came out from behind her Hide-in-Shadows, staring around at the others. "I mean, just what the heck!"

"Those were planar travelers. Travelers from other dimensions who come here occasionally. They are all exceedingly strange, both in their mannerisms and in how they act and talk. The dimensional travel does something to them, I think," Jaheira explained, looking shaken. She and her husband both looked over at Harry, nodding their heads firmly in his direction. "Make no mistake. If his transformation had served to surprise us, that ogre mage and his pit fiend would have attacked us instantly. They are all of them fickle creatures, prone to violence if they can get away with it and think themselves the stronger. And that battle would be one we might not have one. Pit fiends are notoriously hard to kill, and that ogre mage seems to be of extremely high level. Your wariness served us very well, Harry."

"Seeing as they were both level fifteen, I'd say so, yes." Harry nodded, slowly returning his sword and shield to his quick slots while Jaheira blanched. "I wonder, will that ability to carry over into actual people, or was it just picking up on how unusual that boy was?"

"If y, y, you are no longer a, a, able to be tricked or l, l, led into an ambush Harry, I swear I will k, k, kiss you," Khalid laughed in relief, throwing an arm around the younger man, in a very un-elvish act. Staring at that ogre mage, Khalid had felt their death coming for them. Khalid had a great fear of powerful mages, and that one certainly had fit the bill even before Harry had shared his level with them.

"Wait, what?" Imoen gaped, never having heard about this mage ability before. "Dimensional crossings are a thing? I mean, that's a learnable spell?"

"No, it is not, not for us born on the Prime material plane. Planar travelers are an exception to the rule about actually traveling between the dimensions. Many of them travel from one dimension to another routinely, and not just the fiends from hell like that pit fiend or others like them. Some are born with the ability, like many Tieflings, half-devils. Others acquire it, but all of them use it routinely to simply slip from one dimension to another, and even the good-leaning members are quite odd to deal with, their dialogue a strange mix of different tongues, full of weird idioms. That is about as much as I can tell you about it. Why the interest?"

“Can you imagine the kind of heists you could pull with that!?” Imoen asked, having already come up with an excuse to cover her interest. After all, they hadn’t told everyone else about her and Harry’s semi-otherworldly origins.

Of course, that begs the question, if I go home like this, then does that mean I’ll never be able to merge back with my original body? I know Harry’s disappeared, so does that mean his new body completely replaced his old one, even if we’re able to get back? Damn! Wouldn’t everyone back home be surprised! They lose the scrawny but well-intentioned Boy Who Lived and get back the 18-year-old battle-hardened warrior Harry, son of the Murder-Manwhore.

The giggles the pink-haired girl fell into caused Jaheira to shake her head and looked over at Harry. He just shrugged his shoulders and indicated Khalid should get a move on. “We’ve wasted enough time. Let’s find our original route and get a move on.”

It was pushing evening when the forest began to slowly transform around them. The normal green-leafed trees were slowly replaced by a new variety of trees, their leaves looking almost fire-tipped, something that caused Harry and Imoen to stop and stare. Khalid slapped him on the shoulder as he headed back down the column, switching out with Jaheira at the front. “T, t, they are called f, f, fire leaf trees lad. They come in clumps, and a, a, are somewhat rare, but t, t, they are normal t, t, trees. I am told t, t, that they can be c, c, cultivated to create some a, a, amazing tasting m, m, maple syrup, but they are simply a variety of m, m, maple trees.”

“Whatever they, are the view is amazing,” Harry breathed. “It almost looked up as if we had changed seasons for a moment there.”

Soon after that, the sun began to set, and everyone decided that it was time to find a place to stay for the night. They would not be making Nashkel today, and that meant they were down to only two days before their friends would be beyond resurrection.

It was as they were doing so that they were hailed, the voice coming out of the rain to one side and somewhat above them, on top of what Harry had taken to just be a large piece of rock, but which was actually a small bluff. “You there! What are adventurers doing in Amn? Have you come down to spy on our supposed troop buildup? Why else would you be traveling through territory that rightfully belongs to my family?”

The voice was that of a woman. It was sharp, condescending, arrogant and yet almost childish sounding in comparison to the tone Jaheira could sometimes use, haughty more than certain. It was a voice that took itself very seriously indeed and was used to other people doing so, but Harry, for some reason that he decided to put down to his Greater Observation skill, felt it was not a voice with much actual experience behind it.

“Family land?” Harry looked over at Khalid, who shook his head then added an extra shrug of the shoulders as if indicating that it was all news to him that this area was owned by a single noble family.

A moment later, the speaker came down from a small promontory. The trail that led down was small, only enough room for one person to make their way down. The first person down it was a man, but he was obviously a guard of some kind, heavily armed, and well-muscled. Added to this was what Harry could see via his AAS.

Name: Delgod.

Race: Human

Class: Level 5 Warrior.

Delgod is an employee of the Argrim family and one of two bodyguards assigned to lady Sendai, the family heiress. He will keep to his chosen word and contract, knowing the future of mercenaries who break deals with their employers is very short indeed, particularly in Amn. Both the law and the Shadow Thieves frown on that idea. He is an archer by trade but carries a short sword and buckler as well.

Attitude towards you: True Neutral.

Whatever his personal feelings, Delgod will follow Lady Sendai and whatever brand of idiocy she is trying on today. Knowing that like a new cloak, she might well never come back to it again.

Attitude towards his charge:

You can sense that he is physically interested in her, but that interest wanes whenever she opens her mouth. And he would never think of acting upon that kind of thing. What happens to mercenaries who break their word is nothing in comparison to mercenaries who take liberties with their client's daughters.

The next person down the small trail was the aforementioned lady Sendai. She was a little bit older than Harry had expected, looking to be in her mid-twenties rather than mid-teens, with a haughty demeanor and well-formed body hidden underneath a cloak and formed metal chest plate. It was obviously an item that had seen quite a bit of wear but was just as obviously extremely expensive, it's molding accentuating her body perfectly without being too overt. This was accompanied by bangles on both wrists, a large necklace and earrings.

Imoen whispered in Harry's ear that she had seen something of this fashion in books written the past few years from Amn. Apparently, ostentatious displays of wealth were the thing to do in high society there. Harry personally felt it was a waste, but the one piece of jewelry that really caught Harry's attention was Sendai's helmet. The thing looked as if it had golden horns for goodness sake! *What the heck is the point of gold on a piece of armor? Especially a helmet?*

Name: Lady Sendai of house Argrim.

Race: Human.

Class: Level 6 Warrior.

Lady Sendai is the quintessential rich bitch aristocrat.

Harry had to stop for a moment to bite at his lip to keep from laughing. Evidently, his AAS system had finally run into someone besides Jaheira that it didn't like it all. Once he was certain he wasn't going to start laughing, Harry continued to read what he could see looking at the woman.

Caustic, sarcastic, domineering to those under her, ass-kissing those above, a typical aristocrat. Her tongue is almost as dangerous as her long sword, and she looks angry and annoyed even beyond her normal mode at the moment. You can also tell that some of her jewelry is enchanted, although you get the impression that most of it is enchanted simply to look better on her than to help her in a fight.

Attitude towards you: Haughty Disdain.

Sendai believes that you are beneath her, just like everyone else that is not a nobleman of Amn. Be warned, she has little to no sense of empathy or proportion and is liable to act without care of the consequences.

After Sendai came a third person, another warrior, who like the first, was armed with a short sword, chain mail armor, and a longbow. His name was Alexander, and he too was a warrior, but that was all Harry could read before Sendai barked out, "Well!?" staring at the adventures angrily. "Are you going to tell me what you're doing on my family's lands? Or are you just going to stand there staring in awe at my beauty? I have to tell you, that kind of thing gets old after a few minutes, and I normally have peasants who stare too long flogged."

"Girl," Jaheira began as Harry scowled, "I have no idea where you think you are, but this land is not, as far as I know, owned by anyone. Indeed, is it not Amn's policy that any lands near its borders are held by the Council of Five?"

The council of Five, Harry had learned before this, was the ruling body that governed Amn. Five people were chosen by blind ballot by the powerful merchant houses that were the nobility of Amn to anonymously lead the nation. Harry had long wondered how that worked but now wasn't the time to ask a local how such a thing was possible.

"Trivialities." The woman waved Jaheira's words off as if they were not important at all. "My family has used the Fire Leaf Forest as our personal hunting ground for centuries. Ownership is nine-tenths of the law. And it would behoove that an adventurer, a mere bronze class vagabond, to remember your place. Do not speak to me, a gold caste, as if we are equal, and not even assume that you understand what real power is like." Sendai added a sneer to her words at that, looking Jaheira up and down with such disdain it was like the half-elven woman was dung on her shoe.

Bronze and gold were two examples of the social-statuses used in Amn. Wealth was everything in Amn.

Looking at Jaheira's suddenly flinty gaze, Harry realized that letting Jaheira continue to speak would be simply adding fuel to the already lit fire of this conversation. He took a step forward, nodding his head as politely as he could manage to despite the woman's attitude. "If that is the case, then we beg your pardon. We are traveling through to Nashkel in the hopes of getting our friend aid from the priest there."

The woman's eyes flicked to him, then over to where Minsc stood well back of the others, carrying the unconscious form of his which. "A likely story," she sneered. "You're probably bandits or some such, returning with a kidnap victim, perhaps?"

Minsc growled even as he began to slide backward away from the Amnians. "Minsc does not like the way this pretty lady's words show her true nature. To even think that Minsc had stolen his Witch. That is an insult that most warriors of Rasheman would see as worthy of being challenged to a duel!"

"As if I would lower myself to duel with an ore like you," The woman scoffed, using the term that meant menial, criminal or slave in Amn. "But you're still on my family's lands and must pay some kind of toll I feel, even if I were to be so foolish as to let you go, which I am debating. Marching you all back to be hung could be most amusing and may well help my family's standing if we turn in such spies from Baldur's Gate."

"Now that we will not be doing!" Harry shot back firmly, his own temper fraying somewhat. "Not only have I never heard of you or your family, but we are not citizens of Baldur's Gate or Amn. We are adventurers, seeking to finish one quest while finding another in Nashkel."

"Hey, that's true!" Imoen laughed, but it was one with an edge to it as she looked at the other woman. "My friend and I are very well-read, and I've read every book about Amn, and it's history. I've never even heard of your house. How can a minor house that's never been in the history books for anything possibly own territory this large?"

"You dare insult my house! I'll have you flogged for that before you are hung!" Sendai shrieked. Evidently, she could dish out the insults but not take them. She grabbed her longsword from its scabbard as she ordered, "Delgod, Alexander, take them!"

Before the first arrow could fly, Imoen disappeared into her Hide-in-Shadows, and Harry was suddenly holding his warhammer and his tower shield. The first arrow fired by the two guards slammed into his tower shield, skittering off it to one side as the three Amnians stared at him in shock, astonished by how quickly he had armed himself after having seemed to be only armed with a warhammer.

Harry instantly took advantage of this. “Minsc, fall back, protect Dynaheir. Khalid with me. Jaheira...”

A blazing bolt of lightning was already flying from the tip of Jaheira’s fingers towards the young woman, who cried out in shock, and a squalling cry of “You dare!” was heard as one of the bangles on her wrist’s bloated in light, a shield momentarily intercepting the weapon.

Sendai has used a charm of protection against the elements. The charm has worked but seems to be of poor quality. It will only work once more before being overwhelmed.

Two more arrows flew, both of them aimed towards Jaheira now, but Harry interposed himself quickly, cutting them off halfway before they could hit the half-elven, the arrows shattering on his shield. Then one of the warrior bodyguards grunted in pain, dropping his bow as Imoen appeared next to him, her short sword stabbing. A last-second move to the side for some reason, possibly to grab another arrow from his quiver, had saved him from the full power of a Backstab, but the wound was deep and bleeding. He raised his own sword, quicker than she had expected, but still too slow to hit her as she danced away, before coming in again with her short sword.

Sendai surprisingly met Khalid’s charge, which had continued after Harry had broken off to interpose his shield between the archers and Jaheira, their shields clashing together, but her strength seemed equal to Khalid’s. The two of them exchanged sword thrusts, and Khalid swiftly proved the better swordsman, pushing the haughty woman back on her heels within a few thrusts.

The next second, Jaheira’s Tangling Vines spell struck, entangling the woman, Khalid, her two bodyguards, and Imoen. Imoen, however, had been expecting it. Her opponent had not, and she leaped back and away as the man became entangled, cursing while more of his blood began to flow down from his wound. Imoen shifted out of using her sword to her short bow, and before the man could break free, she had an arrow in the air from only about fifteen feet away.

Her aim was true, indeed at this range, it might’ve well been impossible for her to miss. The arrow took the man in the throat, punching straight through and out the back of his neck. “GGGgggg...” He gurgled, one hand raising to grab at the shaft, but then collapsed onto his face, dead but still twitching.

With that man dealt with, Imoen shifted her attention to the other archer. He had sent another arrow shaft out, this time at Khalid, who, like Harry, used his shield like it away, though this had allowed Sendai to break away from their exchange. The woman had also kicked out of the Tangling Vines and was moving back and way from the once more advancing Harry and Khalid.

The other archer, Alexander, turned on Imoen quickly, sending a shaft her way, which forced her to dodge, before she was caught by the Tangling Vines.

Before he could fire again, A sling stone took the man high in the side, right underneath one outstretched arm as he pulled back on his bow, while Harry raced forward to rejoin Khalid in pressing Sendai. “Knock her out, don’t kill her!” Harry ordered, shaking his head “I don’t think she’s enough of a threat to warrant killing all three of them.”

Khalid grunted agreement and batted aside Sendai’s desperate lunge with her longsword, but the woman’s attention on Khalid had allowed Harry to close, and with a thought, his hammer disappeared, and he grabbed at her wrist, twisting hard, forcing Sendai to drop her sword to the ground. A shield strike followed, smashing Sendai nearly off her feet, as Harry grabbed at her -rather stupid – horned helmet, tearing it off Sendai’s head.

What Harry would have done at that point would never be known, as, unbeknownst to Harry and Khalid in the midst of battle, Jaheira had followed on their heels. Now she sidestepped around her husband, causing both men to twitch in surprise and vow to work on their situational awareness, before rearing her hand back in a slap.

Sendai, as a Warrior, should have been nearly immune to a slap from Jaheira, a Druid. But, despite being a warrior, Sendai was a very short woman, and while her strength might have been enough to stand against Khalid, her constitution and durability had evidently suffered. The slap caused her to reel backward. A second later, even as her face firmed from its initial shock, her eyes flashing with anger, a second slap rang out.

This caused Sendai to stumble to her knees, and Jaheira reached down and very gently lifted her face forcing Sendai to look up at her. “In the future, consider your actions more carefully, and do not act in such a precipitous manner.”

With that, Jaheira reared back and slapped the other woman again. This was enough to send the Amnian heiress unconscious to the floor of the forest.

“Bloody Hell,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. He then looked over to the only Amnian still on his feet and, hefting his warhammer once more from his quick slot, lifted it menacingly. “Surrender?”

Grumbling, Alexander agreed, dropping his weapon and holding his hands up.

“W, w, will the Argrim f, f, family pay for your friend t, t, there to be revived?” Khalid inquired politely, shaking his head at this bit of idiocy. Sendai’s aggressive arrogance and stupidity had been astonishing.

Alexander nodded. “They’ll pay. And for all her mouthing off like that, you all should probably steer clear of Amn for a while. Her family really is powerful, even if it is also kind of new on the scene. They’re not likely to forget this humiliation.”

“Then perhaps they should teach their heiress some more manners, and a little something called empathy?” Jaheira muttered, then paused, one hand going to her neck, her eyes widening.

Harry was about to ask what was wrong when he felt something hit him in the back right underneath his chest plate. He grunted in pain as the message:

You have been Backstabbed, minus forty health.

Your lung has been punctured, you have been afflicted with the negative status, Internal Bleeding. Your movement is impaired, and you will lose health -4 for every thirty seconds until it is healed.

Blood beginning to drip from underneath his chest plate, Harry turned and saw a man in typical thief armor: studded leather armor with a hood and a short sword dancing away from him.

Name: Vax

Race: Human

Class: Level 6 Thief

Attitude towards you: He just stabbed you!

Vax is a thief who works freelance in Amn, which should tell you quite a bit about his abilities and the kind of jobs he takes. Only the best thieves and killers can operate free of Shadow Thief oversight. Oddly enough, beyond his extreme ability with Hide-in-Shadows, he is more of a Fighter than a thief, relying on his partner to disable traps and any actual thievery. His short sword is also nasty looking.

“Sorry,” Vax sneered as he spoke almost conversationally as he backed away before coming in rapidly, throwing out a short sword in an expert series of thrusts that Harry’s tower shield took even as he stumbled back. “But business is business. And we’ve been following that stupid bitch for a while now. Seemed like a good time to take two birds for the price of one.”

At the same time that Vax had begun to attack Harry, darts had been hurled at both Imoen and Jaheira, hitting them in their necks, causing them to crumble to their knees. Both women were also hit with a status change.

Jaheira and Imoen are stunned.

Stunned will last for two minutes + 20 seconds for every point below 18 Constitution the afflicted individual has.

Until it fades, the stunned individual will be unable to perform any action.

Khalid turned, blocking a dart with his shield, but another dart on the heels of the first slid past his shield, hitting Khalid on the side of his neck. He fell, stunned as Alexander scrambled for his sword from the ground.

A man appeared out of Hide-in-Shadows then.

Name: Zal

Race: Human

Class: Thief Level 6

Attitude towards you: Disdainful Apathy. You are a secondary mark to him, nothing more.

Zal is Vax's partner in crime. He has a thieving ability that makes him one of the best but isn't all that good in a fight beyond his ability to throw darts, something that is surprisingly good. He can use throwing daggers, darts or anything else that comes to hand but lacks Vax's ability with short swords. Weathering his long-range attacks, though, is something few can do.

He kicked Jaheira away from Sendai, before he reached down for her, a dagger appearing in his other hand like magic.

"Minsc, take the dart thrower!" Harry shouted, having seen out the corner of his eye that his large friend had pulled out his bow and readied an arrow. He had hesitated to shoot, for fear of the movement doing some harm to Dynaheir, and the battle looked to have been over for a moment.

He twisted around now, sending the shaft towards the man standing over Sendai, as the guardsman Alexander engaged the man who had just backstabbed Harry, before stumbling backward with a cry of agony as the man cut off his sword hand at the wrist.

Harry, however, had time to use Lay on Hands. This stopped his internal bleeding for now. He charged forward, and the man had barely a second to turn before Harry's hammer slammed into his side, crushing his ribs. A studded leather gambeson was no match for a warhammer, and he stumbled back with a grunt of pain as he tried to raise his weapon.

Harry dodged his return blow easily and brought his hammer around again, crashing into the side of the man's head, pulping it and sending his corpse collapsing to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

He then turned to the crippled Alexander, who had stumbled to his knees, holding his hand with his other one. Swiftly pulling out a piece of clothing from his item box, Harry began to make a tourniquet a few inches above the wound, while Khalid, who had greater constitution than Imoen or Jaheira, hurried to his wife's side, stopping just a second to behead the man who had been hurling darts a moment ago. Minsc's arrow had taken him in the shoulder, making him easy pickings for Khalid.

Removing the dart from Jaheira's neck helped to revive her within seconds, and she shook herself, looking around. Then she stumbled to her feet and hurried over to Harry, using a spell of medium healing on him, then two minor healing spells on Alexander. This caused the blood flow from his chopped off-hand, which Harry had already been trying to stop, to cease entirely.

But of course, his hand did not start growing back. That was beyond any spell that Jaheira had access to. Indeed, even at the height of her powers, reattaching limbs was beyond a druid's ability. Another healing spell deadened the man's pain and made the wound started to close up. A fourth, and Jaheira was out of minor healing spells, shaking her head in annoyance.

"Stupid girl," she muttered curses to Sendai, under her breath at the amount of trouble that girl it caused. "I swear her parents should have spent more time taking a switch to her backside than..."

"How much are you getting paid for this?" Harry interjected, cutting through her diatribe as she looked at Alexander.

"Not nearly enough," the man replied caustically, shaking his head angrily. He looked around for his severed hand and picked it up, the hand disappearing in his item box for a moment. That would preserve the hand, although the wound would have to be reopened by a priest to reattach it. "Still, just like reviving Delgod, the Argrims will pay for this too."

"I think we might wish to take some kind of idiocy fee from Sendai. As well as taking everything these two thieves had on them," Jaheira suggested.

Harry chuckled. "We'll take Delgod's weapon and armor. That will at least make him easier for you to carry and will compensate us along with a third of any gold Sendai has. She keeps her weapons. Imoen, search the body of the thieves, and take anything they have."

"Sendai's got at least six-hundred gold on her. Take it, and be well," Alexander said with a chuckle. He was remarkably upbeat for someone who had lost a hand. After all, he still had his life, and most adventurers wouldn't have bothered with kid gloves after the insults Sendai had sent their way, to say nothing of actually starting a fight.

Shaking his head, Alexander watched as the adventurers took what they wanted from Sendai's unconscious body, noting absently that neither of the two men had joined in on the looting, leaving it to the bossy half-elf.

Indeed, Harry had turned his attention fully onto the two thieves, whose ability to use Hide-in-Shadows to evade his map and the Darts of Stunning had used had come far too close to actually overwhelming them. On them, Harry found Three Darts of Stunning and something that looked even more interesting.

Bracers of Archery: The Dale's Protector

During a dangerous meeting with a rival ruler, the king of the Great Dale requested the protection of his best archers in addition to his usual guard. The archers, each equipped with an enchanted bow and bracers, hid within range of the gathering. As predicted, enemy troops attempted to seize the king and force their will over his rule. But none had anticipated the

amazing accuracy and lethality of the hidden archers. The king was able to escape unharmed; in fact, none of the ambush members even lived to approach him

+2 Missile Weapon Attack bonus. +2 Missile attack speed.

Harry instantly handed them back to Imoen with a grin, and her eyes widened as she too read the description, quickly putting them on instead of the Bracers of Defense +1, which Jaheira took with a nod of thanks. Imoen also took the Short Sword +1 that Val had been using. With that, the group moved away from Alexander and his unconscious mistress. By this point night had fallen, and normally they would simply make camp where they were without any better option in sight.

However, Harry, instead of suggesting that, ignored the hunger pangs from his stomach as he turned to the others. "So, does anyone else think we should just push on through the night? I'm getting the impression that staying in this area is more trouble than it's worth."

"Agreed," everyone else answered as one, as Jaheira shook her head, looking around in something approaching horrified wonder. "Since when did this place become such a haven for craziness?"

To that, no one had an answer, and she sighed then looked to her husband. "Shall we?"

It took the two half-elves no time at all to discover which way they had to go. It turned out that they had indeed come a little too far south, thanks to the 'young boy' and his search for his 'dog'. Coming back, they reported this to the others, with Jaheira adding, "And the next time you feel something off about someone, pray tell us."

I did, I just didn't have enough to go on to say whether or not he was a threat, that's all," Harry retorted defensively.

Before they set off, however, Dynaheir moaned, causing Minsc to stop instantly, unbuckling the makeshift holder that was containing his Witch to his back, turning and gently setting her down on the ground.

OOOOOO

For Dynaheir, it was like trying to break the surface after drowning in a nightmare. A nightmare that had begun when the gnolls had attacked her and her warrior companion, Minsc. That memory segued into the barbarous torture of the gnolls, their smells, the horror of the food they had tried to make her eat. Dynaheir could remember the snap of her fingers as they broke and could feel them twitching now.

Yet there was no pain in the movement, and even before she opened her eyes, she moved her fingers lightly against one another, wondering at their wholeness once more. More

than that, she could feel grass underneath her back. Nearby, she could hear the sounds of a forest, felt a fire to one side, distant enough to not be a threat, close enough to warm her slightly.

As a Witch of Rasheman, Dynaheir was almost as open to the spirit realm as a druid was to nature. She could feel the forest all around her and knew that there were no gnolls of vile creatures nearby. She was free. It was only when she was certain of that fact that Dynaheir opened her eyes to see Minsc hovering over her. "So, I am rescued. And this is no trick, then if you, my stalwart guardian, are here."

She tried to raise a hand, but it fell back, as Dynaheir realized she still felt as weak as a kitten. As that fact hit her, the rest of her body's sensation flood back into Dynaheir's mind, and she could feel her head was throbbing something fierce.

"Lady Dynaheir, my Witch! Your eyes have opened! Thank goodness! Thank goodness for goodness! Together, you, Harry, and our friends, we will find the minds who set those wicked gnolls upon us, and bring them a good butt-kicking!" Minsc began to bellow to cry like a babe almost, reaching forward as if to hug Dynaheir.

But a female voice cut across his blubbling. "Enough of that, Minsc! I realize this is an emotional time, but moving Dynaheir will not help her feel any faster. My name is Jaheira," the woman went on as she knelt down, holding a finger in front of Dynaheir's eyes as someone else moved a torch slightly closer. "I believe you have a nasty concussion, but I need to make certain that now that you are waking up that your mind has taken no permanent damage."

Obligingly Dynaheir followed the moving finger with her eyes, idly noting the woman was at least a half-elf and one of imposing beauty at that. But following the finger, Dynaheir quickly found her eyes watering. "My head is throbbing most noticeably, but I am at least able to follow your movements. It causes me some pain, but no more than could be expected from a concussion."

"It looked as if you were beaten badly at some point, Miss. Can you tell us why they were so interested in you?" Another voice, this time that of a man, young but confident, spoke out of the darkness.

"I have no idea, to be frank. It smacks of some greater purpose, but the gnolls did not speak common around me," Dynaheir answered, grimacing as she tried to turn her head to find the speaker only to stop as more pain shot through her head. "And who are you to ask such?"

"I'm sort of the leader of this group," the voice answered, and then three more faces leaned into the light of the torch so that Dynaheir could see them. Dynaheir's eyes flicked first to Jaheira, then up to Khalid, easily able to tell that both of them were older by far than the young man who had spoken. She had seen that face before somewhere, and her eyes widened for a second before she got control of her expression once more, sending a prayer to the Spirits, shaking her head in amusement. The spirits of the world move in mysterious ways. Here

I come to find the one, the man who might be the fulcrum to ushering in a new Time of Troubles or stopping such in its tracks. I am first captured only to be rescued by Minsc in the company of the very individual I was searching for!”

For a moment, it was all Dynaheir could do to not laugh aloud at the irony. When she got control of herself, she said, “I think you most kind adventurers. I am uncertain what payment my large companion was able to give thee for your aid, but understand that I consider myself in your debt.”

OOOOOOO

Smiling at the fact the woman seemed to have most of her faculties Harry took a moment to read the information above Dynaheir as it changed.

Name: Dynaheir

Race: Human

Class: Mage level 7.

Relationship status: cautious optimism. Due to your aiding in rescuing her from durance vile, you have 1800/3000 Respect, 2000/3000 Trust.

Dynaheir is a Witch of Rasheman, who is on her spirit quest, a rite of passage similar to her companion’s dajemma. She seems very sure of herself, is possessed and is very demanding of her companions. She is concerned about the sanity of her bodyguard, though she has an obvious respect for him and will not go far from his side. Beware her tongue, for it is as sharp as a dagger, and she is not afraid to use it if you do something she disapproves of.

Finished reading, Harry banished the message with the ease of an eye-flick, before shaking his head firmly. “No debt. Debts come and go, and debtors never make good companions.”

Jaheira began to laugh gaily, with Khalid joining her a second later. “Gorion! That was a Gorion line,” she chortled, slapping Harry on the shoulder lightly. “I have said it before, but Gorion was a good teacher.”

“He was a good man, which I think rather more important,” Harry retorted, smiling slightly over at the other woman before turning back to Dynaheir, noticing idly that had won him another fifty respect and trust points with Jaheira, and a hundred friendship points with Khalid. “We rescued you because it was the right thing to do and because Minsc pled with us to help him. Now, I count Minsc among my friends and companions, and even were a good deed not worth doing on its own, there would be no talk of debt between us.”

Dynaheir smiled at that. "Very well, but if you do not count I debts, then will you at least allow me to join you and my companion permanently? To take part in your adventures going forward?"

"If you wish to do so once you are fully healed up, and you learn about what we are about at the moment, then..."

"You should hear it! Dynaheir, Harry, his companions they have chosen to look into the iron shortage, of which we heard about the moment we set foot on the ports of Baldur's Gate. They believe some evil villain he is about it, and have found clues, and believe that even your being captured might have been due to the same vile villain!" Minsc cut in eagerly.

"Then your cause is just, and I doubly wish to join you." Dynaheir smiled. "Although I will not begrudge time spent healing myself up."

"We're nearly to Nashkel, where we hope to be able to revive our companions slain during our assault on the Gnoll fortress. Hopefully, that same priest will be able to help with your difficulties."

"Companions? There were more than the four of you plus my good guardian, then? I am sorry to hear that others died in my rescue."

Inwardly, Harry breathed a sigh of relief that this was going so well. Minsc hadn't blurted out about his gamer abilities, as Harry had been worried about, and Dynaheir was remarkably calm about things. Although from the look in Jaheira's face, she wasn't so sanguine about that. Perhaps that sort of mental distance was another sign of a concussion? Harry didn't know and wasn't going to ask.

His relief, alas, came too soon.

"Do not be sorry until you hear that one the identity of one of the slain," Minsc grumbled, looking surly at the memory of Edwin. Although Edwin's magic had made many of the battles they had fought against the gnolls far easier than they would have been, indeed Edwin's magic had made more than a few winnable when they would not have been otherwise, Minsc had not warmed to the idea of him working with them. "Harry, with his silver tongue, was able to convince the Red Wizard who dogged our footsteps to join us in rescuing you. He died in the doing fighting against the dungeon boss, the chieftain of the gnoll tribe, a warrior's death for one who did not deserve such."

Dynaheir's eyes widened, and she tried to sit up, only to fall back in pain. "GAaagh, y, you did what! The Red Wizard! How..."

Cursing his earlier optimism, Harry decided to grab the bull by the horns. "We ran into him near a xuart village that was allied with the gnolls who had taken you. We wiped them out and were able to then find our way to the gnoll fortress afterward. Edwin joined us because he

was both in the area and needed aid and because I convinced him that upon our rescuing you, you would be willing to answer ten questions of his, freely and without guile.”

“You had no right to promise that!” Dynaheir shouted before grasping her head with both hands.

As Dynaheir spoke, Harry received another message, one he felt rather redundant frankly.

Ouch. Your actions have cost you -800 trust with Dynaheir. I guess she really doesn't like knowing you had dealings with the Red Wizard, even if it helped to save her life.

Jaheira shook her head, holding out some herbs that she had found while the others had been setting up camp. “Eat these. Raw, they have more power, although they will taste awful. They will help with the pain, but I am unwilling to try to help heal your mind if it has truly taken some hurt. Your eyes are not tracking very well, and one of your pupils is more dilated than the other, indicating further damage.”

After swallowing the herbs, Dynaheir looked up angrily at Harry. “You had no right to promise that. Do you have any idea what you have done? I am a witch of Rasheman. I have the True Sight, which has allowed Rasheman to remain free of the Red Wizards and the Nar for generations ever since they started to encroach on our borders. With your promise binding me, you have handed this Red Wizard a key to breaking that defense.”

“Have I?” Harry retorted, crossing his arms. “Is this True Sight something a wizard can learn? Is it something they don't know about already? Judging by how you're saying that you have used it to offset their plans, I can't see them not having at least discovered that it existed. And I never said you couldn't steer the answers in one direction or another. Or are you saying Edwin is smarter than you?”

That caused Dynaheir's anger to sputter out for a moment. Then she shook her head, wincing once more at the movement even as she began to munch on more herbs that Jaheira was handing her. The grimace on Dynaheir's face was for both Harry's words and the fact that Jaheira had several handfuls more of the herbs for Dynaheir to eat. “Perhaps, perhaps not. But the more they know about it, the more they will be able to offset it, to possibly obfuscate the truth of their plans from us. As much as I loathe everything they stand for, the Red Wizards are excellent at wizardry.”

She hissed in anger but then sighed. “...Yet, if the Red Wizard died to try to free me, and you promised him this, I am bound by that promise as if I made it myself. But I will not forget this.” She fell silent for a moment, before asking warily, “And do you assume that he will continue to travel with you?”

“I have no idea,” Harry shrugged. “Perhaps he’ll leave after asking his 10 questions, perhaps not. Certainly, I won’t turn him away if he decides to continue journeying with us. But I won’t stop him if he doesn’t wish to either.”

That caused Dynaheir to hiss again, but Harry wasn’t about to lie about that with her. Edwin’s magical strength had impressed Harry, and the fireballs, in particular, were crowd-pleasers.

“Very well. I had already determined that I would travel with you, given the friendship you and Minsc both speak of. Now I have yet another reason to make certain that the Red Wizard...”

“His name is Edwin,” Harry interjected mildly. “Regardless of his reasons, he **did** die to help free you.”

Dynaheir ground her teeth but nodded. “Edwin, then, to keep him from influencing you.”

Harry shrugged his shoulders and was about to use the idiom whatever floats your boat, before realizing he hadn’t heard that kind of thing since arriving in this weird world. “As you wish, my lady,” he said instead. “Although I think you and Minsc should both make that your decision to follow us after you are fully healed and have all your mental faculties back. For now, I think introductions are in order all around.”

Listening to the names, Dynaheir looked at each individual as they were introduced. But most of her attention remained on Harry, almost to the point where Imoen wondered if maybe she had a bit of a crush on her handsome savior.

The group stayed where they were that night as Dynaheir was fed another two bowls of soup, this time accompanied with some fresh deer meat grilled over a fire, courtesy of Khalid and his bow. She fell asleep soon, but since Harry and Imoen had already made camp.

The next day they roused at dawn, with Jaheira gently rousing Dynaheir once more to eat more broth and some more deer meat. While Imoen fed the Rashemani woman, Jaheira examined her reaction times once more, halting Dynahier from moving whenever she tried to do so, making the younger human woman become somewhat annoyed.

This was assuaged by Minsc filling Dynaheir in on the battle to save her, moving from when they attacked the xvart village on. But thankfully, Minsc had taken to heart the fact that Harry and Imoen wanted to reveal their secrets to his Witch in their own time. He did not mention any of the Blood Magic spells that they used during the battle in his retelling.

As the tale finished, Dynaheir finally shook her head slightly, looking over at Harry and the others. “The battles you waged to save me sound fraught enough that I will not quibble about paying for Edwin’s aid,” she said, although she still sounded a little too chilly toward Harry as he looked at her.

Harry shrugged his shoulders at that, looking a little uncomfortable at the praise, while Imoen simply nodded as did Jaheira and Khalid. "While more preparation time before tackling that dungeon would've been nice, we won through in the end. And so long as we can get to Nashkel in enough time, without anything permanent happening to our companions. For all they annoyed me each in their own way, I would not wish permanent death on either of them."

"And with that," Harry announced on the heels of Jaheira's words, "I think it's time to be off. Minsc, are you still good to carry Dynaheir?"

"Carry!?" Dynaheir exclaimed. "I am not some rucksack that needs to be carried! I can walk on my own."

Harry shook his head slightly. "If that was true, you'd be able to feed yourself at the very least." Dynaheir had stopped fighting Imoen's feeding her after only a few token protests.

"Furthermore, your head has taken such damage that I would much rather you not move it, and that it stays in its protected position in the makeshift carrying case that my husband made," Jaheira said, her lips twitching slightly.

Dynaheir looked over at the thing beside her makeshift bedroll, then tried to just sit up, a prelude to standing up, which failed miserably. She groaned, holding her head in both hands and falling back slightly.

Jaheira looked over at Khalid and Harry, and Harry nodded. She moved to Dynaheir's side and began a healing spell, bringing her health up further by 10 points, then further again by another spell. The pain in Dynaheir's head subsided at this but did not disappear entirely, while the rest of her aches and pains, having been kept immobile after having been held captive for so long, disappeared entirely, making her much more comfortable. Physically anyway. As Imoen and Jaheira began to move her back into the carry case, she grimaced them in embarrassment. "This is humiliating."

It only got worse when Khalid and Harry moved over to lift the carry-on case, a thing of various wooden pieces and leather straps that Khalid and Imoen had devised between them, on to Minsc's back. He put his left hands underneath the back of the underside of her thighs as they went around his back, while Dynaheir's arms hung loosely over his shoulders as the rest of her was kept in an upright position, a strap across the forehead keeping her head upright in a somewhat padded wooden box. "It is like I am a baby being carried!"

"But my Witch is even lighter than a baby if just as precious!" Minsc laughed, followed by a squeak from Boo. "And Boo says that you should not worry overmuch about your dignity. At least you have your life for the moment, your dignity can return in time."

Dynaheir's eyes moved from where they had been trying to stare over Minsc's head down to one of his shoulders, grimacing as she stared into two beady eyes. "I see you still have that little creature then? Dare I ask how you kept it hidden during our captivity?"

“Such a question is best left to scholars. Boo is very tiny, and there is so much of mighty Minsc to search.”

Dynaheir grimaced, and Imoen laughed, saying that had been one of the first questions she had posed when they first met up with Minsc.

With that, the group was off once more, moving at a brisk pace through the woods, with Minsc taking up the rear with Jaheira and Dynaheir on his back. Dynaheir’s embarrassment did not fade for the rest of the day, as they travel through the fire Leaf Forest, through the day and pushing into the evening.

Harry found himself at the head of the column with Khalid again as they finally broke out of the forest, finding themselves on the edge of what looked like a small bit of farmland ahead of them. Harry could make out what looked like the lights of a cabin of some kind, behind which loomed a wall of dirt and wood, blocking out what might be more lights the distance in either direction.

“N, n, Nashkel,” Khalid announced, slowing down slightly as Imoen came out from the forest behind the two men. “O, o, or rather, the o, o, outskirts of it.”

After the more forest wise Minsc and his precious burden joined them with Jaheira, the group made their way forward, moving along the edge of the farmland until they found a path through it, leading to the palisade and the guards standing watch there.

They still saw the adventurers coming and seems to be on a hair-trigger as one of them hailed them, saying, “Hold there, strangers!”

The parties moving out of the darkness did so, and the guards seemed to relax slightly. The spokesman shouted out, “State your business in Nashkel.”

“I wish to resurrect two of our comrades, get healing for a third, and then see about a job,” Harry replied before anyone else could say anything.

The guards asked them to step further into the light of the torches, and then to wait there as they sent someone for their lieutenant.

“Lieutenant, is it?” Jaheira murmured, her brows furrowing. “A captain should be in charge of the Nashkel town watch, not a lieutenant. And there did seem to be a bit of a pause before he used the lesser rank.”

“We’ll find out, I’m sure,” Harry shrugged, before moving over to help Minsc with the backpack, as Dynaheir had just growled out that she wanted to see if she could stand. She could, if on wobbly legs, and she remained there, standing on her own but leaning against Minsc, scowling in irritation at her weakness.

As Harry looked at the guards, he noticed a message appearing in his line of sight, once more giving him more information on what he was looking at.

Amn Soldier

Another variety of the same type of guardsmen at the Friendly Arm Inn the normal soldier of Amn isn't really a match for an adventurer except for very low-level ones. Unlike the guards, the Amnian guards are extremely well-trained to use group tactics against adventurers. They also come in two varieties, polearm bearing and crossbow bearing.

At that, Harry nodded internally. *The polearm using men to hold you back, circle and pin you in place and the crossbows to make the kill. Simple but effective. Shouldn't be a problem so long as they don't start a fight, though.* With a mental shrug, he continued reading.

They also tend to be found in numbers far greater than most adventurers can deal with, like the soldiers of any other nation. An adventurer could deal with three or four of them. Few adventurers could deal with a company, few parties a brigade, and none could deal an entire army, backed up by their own adventurers.

Soon after Harry finished thinking through that and looking over the guards in question, the two guards sent into the town returned with a third man. He was wearing the same chest plate and colors as the other guards arrived, but this one was an actual adventurer.

Name: Oublek.

Race: Human

Class: Level 6 Warrior.

An adventurer who joined up with the Amn Army, Oublek is young for his rank, which implies he is possibly ambitious to have risen to be a lieutenant. But he could be incompetent as well, given the normally staid nature of life in Nashkel, it's hard to tell. He certainly isn't a native, like the rest of the guard.

Attitude towards you: true neutral, leaning towards low-key eagerness.

While not exactly happy to see you, it doesn't seem personal. At the same time, Oublek might be on the lookout to use a band of Adventurers any way he can, for both the town and his own interests.

"Are you the bounty Hunter Greywolf and his band?" The man inquired abruptly as he moved towards the group, leaving his guards behind at the break in the wall.

"We are not." Harry saw no point in trying to pretend to be someone he was not. "In fact, we're not bounty hunters at all. Although we do have a lot of gnoll ears to turn in for the bounty if you all have the same system as Beregost does."

The man rocked on his heels, staring in some surprise at them before nodding. "Very well, I can authorize payment for those ears, fifteen gold per ear."

Harry frowned, wondering if he should haggle, then deciding he should. "Did you know that there was a knoll fortress two days travel from here?" Harry revealed, before letting his voice harden. "I'll admit it came as something of a surprise to us. And they were very strong. In fact, the fortress had evolved into a dungeon, a level 3. We cleared them out and lost two of our comrades to them. I'm certain that your town can afford more than a mere fifteen gold per ear, especially since that was less than Beregost paid for bandit scalps."

A part of Harry should have been horrified at the idea of using trophies to earn money like this. But for some reason, either due to his Gamer's Mind and its eclectic effect on his emotions, or because he was becoming inured to the violent nature of this world, it didn't bother Harry much. Something he was oddly thankful for, since he figured this wouldn't be the last time he used such a means to gain money.

Looking apologetic, Oublek shook his head. "I can't authorize any more gold than that, so you'll have to take it or leave it."

But Harry wasn't done. "Hold on, you just said 'authorize any more gold'. What if I didn't want gold?"

The Lieutenant narrowed his eyes but slowly nodded. "Given the level of danger you just talked about, I suppose some other kind of type of recompense would be acceptable. What were you thinking of?"

"Could you send a message along with us to the priest of your local temple, so that he doesn't charge us as much as he would normally for a resurrection?" Jaheira requested, stepping in quickly, knowing that Harry wouldn't know about the price of that kind of thing.

"Yes," Oublek answered instantly, I can do that, I'll have him mark the price down as if you were a member of the Amn Army. That'll be two hundred gold per head resurrected rather than the normal six hundred he charges for Adventurers."

Harry grinned and held out his hand. "In that case, I believe we have an agreement. If you can go and to the gold, by the time you get back, I should have been able to pull out the bag from my Item Box."

The man laughed commiseratingly, as that was a frequent complaint of adventurers. He quickly turned back and murmured something to his guards, who began to relax and then headed deeper into the town, while Minsc walked Dynaheir around, under Jaheira's watchful eye. Meanwhile, Khalid and Harry made a show of emptying out their Item Boxes to bring out the various bags holding the ears of the knolls that they had killed. There were actually one hundred and three of them.

Several of them were the blue or orange color of the Elites or Flinds. And one of them was even larger, large enough to be the size of a throwing dagger-like those used by the thief from the evening before. It came from the dungeon boss.

Whispering quickly, Khalid convinced Harry to set those special ears aside. They were worth quite a bit more than just fifteen gold after all, even with the four hundred gold discount they were getting on the resurrections of their allies. The dungeon boss's ear alone would be worth at least a thousand gold on its own.

The Lieutenant came back quickly, and after opening the bags, nodded to one of his men, who began to count them out, tossing the ears into a small, extremely hot fire set into a portable brazier, where they went up in greasy smoke. Eventually, the deal was concluded, with Harry and the party gaining a thousand, three hundred gold and the letter of introduction to the priest.

Jaheira had been silent throughout this, concentrating on watching Dynaheir's face as she had the Rashemani through a series of exercises to test her balance, and her stomach. The effect of the malnutrition and the concussion was alas still very plain for her to see. As they finished though, "Tell me Goodman, is Mayor Denard still offering money to adventurers interested in looking into the issue with your mines?"

"He is indeed. Heck, he'll probably be asking you to stop by if you take a room at the inn, right quick too." Oublek grumbled. "I wish I have enough men to look into it ourselves, we only have a group of twenty guards here. That's not enough to both keep the town safe and look into the issue with our iron at the same time."

One of the other guards spoke, holding up a hand. "If you all want more information, there's a few ex-miners and miner's wives they can talk to. We've been losing miners down there for weeks now. It's getting to be dangerous, and the mine boss, Emerson, is urging the mayor to let him close."

Ding

The Main Quest, Iron Intake Issue, has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

Due to Jaheira's questions and the severity of the issue facing Nashkel, one of the guards of Nashkel has mentioned that the problem within the mine has also been killing the actual miners rather than just damaging the iron somehow as you might've thought previously. Perhaps you should prepare for trouble if you enter those mines?

Harry nodded thoughtfully as if he was reacting to the guardsman's words while really thinking about the implications of the new clue. *So, this won't be just an investigation, but possibly another dungeon battle? Not good, but it doesn't seem as if we'll be facing gnolls either. They aren't exactly good at keeping a low profile for very long, and given a normal gnoll's height, I doubt they would be happy to spend long amounts of time underground either.*

With the idea of getting as prepared as possible, Harry asked about where they could buy and sell some gear, thinking about what he would want down in the deep dark of a mine as well as the kind of terrain that implied something that might not have occurred without his Greater Observation ability urging him on. He also made a note to talk to Jaheira and Dynaheir and Edwin, if the Red Wizard still wished to travel with them, about the spells that would be most useful in such an environment.

As he was handing over the gold, Oublek paused as if struck by an idea, but he was just a little too obvious, and Harry's eyes narrowed little. "You and your band are obviously extremely skilled to kill this many gnolls and only lose two of your number. Would you mind taking on the job for the town guard?"

"It would depend on whether or not it was a rush job," Harry warned. "We were just talking about our looking into the Iron Intake Issue."

Oublek blinked, then chuckled dryly. "Iron Intake Issue, is it? That's kind of funny."

"No, it isn't," Imoen sighed. "It really isn't. Don't humor him, please."

Harry turned and mock-glared at her, before looking back to the Lieutenant. "Like I was saying, unless it's time-sensitive, we can think about it."

Scratching at his cheek for a moment, Oublek frowned before nodding. "I don't think it's time-sensitive, although it could well be. You see, the guard here was led by captain Brage. But he went mad a few days ago.

"Mad, you say?" Dynaheir queried sharply, speaking up for the first time, turning from where Minsc had been helping her walk around. "Some kind of spell?"

"No, or at least we don't think so. It seemed to be a gradual thing. Over a week, the captain became standoffish, quick to anger. Then one day, he cuts down two of our men, smashed down the door to our barracks, and ran off. He was screaming some kind of poem at the top of his lungs, waving his sword in the air."

"Were there any witnesses to this fit?" Jaheira questioned, interest and wariness plain in her voice.

"All the guards saw him that weren't on duty saw him charging out of the barracks, miss," the Lieutenant, replied shrugging his shoulders. "the captain also cut down several farmers on his way out of town, to go with the two slain guards. Brage's now a wanted murderer. If you are hunting or heading along the Sword Coast to the northwest of us – that's the direction he ran out of town - and run into him, we would pay with eight hundred gold coins for proof of his death. He's a menace, and I'm afraid he's going to attack other people until he's put down."

Harry frowned. Whether or not it was the Greater Observation skill, or he was just getting better on his own at reading other people (which he doubted frankly, Harry had never been very good at that), Harry could tell that the man was earnest, but also not telling them everything. There was a gleam of some kind of greed or something else in his face, Harry reflected. But reluctantly, Harry nodded. "It can't be our priority, but we can look into it if we can."

A new small side Quest has been added to your journal: **Find the missing Captain Psycho.**

The former captain of the Nashkel guard apparently went crazy, going from moody and withdrawn to full-on psycho killer. He attacked and killed several of his men and a few townsfolk before running into the hills. Perhaps, if you have the time, you can bring him to justice? If you have a good enough tracker with you, anyway.

Reward: 500XP, 250 gold.

Oublek nodded, then gestured to the two guards who had remained on guard in front of the way deeper into Nashkel. "In that case, I'll thank you kindly if you can, and welcome to Nashkel."

As soon as he passed through the two guards, Harry paused, as suddenly he saw another pop-up message, this one wrapped in gold.

You Have completed Chapter 1. Chapter 2 Begins now.

Gorion's grave lies well behind you, and you have a price on your head supposedly from the same armored giant who slew your foster father. Yet you have set aside a direct pursuit in favor or perhaps discovering what connection your enemy has to the Iron ore shortage slowly dragging Baldur's Gate and Amn into war. Traveling with the Harpers Jaheira and Khalid, longtime friends of Gorion you have finally arrived in Nashkel.

What answers lie here, what threats you may face, you have no idea. All that is certain is that you have taken a step forward in your quest for Justice, or revenge.

After that, another message popped up, follow by a third.

The Main Quest, **Iron Intake Issue**, has been updated!

You have arrived at Nashkel. Whatever problems there are, and you have discovered enough to know there are many of them, they start here.

You have discovered the Following Information:

1: bandits, thieves, and possibly others are involved in cutting off iron shipments going to Baldur's Gate, and possibly into Amn.

2: Even when they cannot stop shipments entirely, the bandits add something, some kind of bizarre alchemical product, to the iron, weakening it to the point where even the best blacksmith can't work with it.

3. Other mines in the Sword Coast, particularly those involved in mining ore, have been attacked by sub-humans, destroyed or taken over. Nashkel is now the largest mine still operating on the Sword Coast.

4: This activity has been part of a marked increase in bandit and subhuman attacks throughout the Sword Coast. Enough to nearly shut down trade save for large, well-guarded caravans.

5: The iron Issue is becoming such a problem that there is talk of war between Baldur's Gate and Amn. This is possibly a goal of the individual or group creating these disturbances.

Even as Harry eye-clicked that away another message took its place.

Congratulations!

On your way to Nashkel, you found all the clues you could on the way here to the Iron Intake Issue. Now, once you go into the mines, you will have all the pieces in hand to not only try to solve the problem but know where to go to find the people behind the scheme.

What you do with that information will be up to you.

Reward: + 1000 experience to all Party members, + 1 to the base wisdom of all party members.

Imoen nudged Harry, while Khalid and Minsc looked at him from where they stood, all but Khalid having both seen the message and their experience increase. Khalid hadn't gotten either reward, alas. "Well, that was kind of cool. More experience is always interesting, right?"

Nodding, Harry smiled briefly at her, though he was more thankful for the plus one to his wisdom stat. Without the points Harry had earned during the 'character creation' page, his wisdom stat was one of the lowest stats he had.

At the same time, Harry was wondering what they could possibly do to such a long-reaching conspiracy. Kill every enemy in front of them? Sure. Solve the issue in Nashkel's own mines? Probably. But a conspiracy like that, that was way bigger than they could fight unless they could hunt down and kill its head. And frankly, Harry was uncertain even if they could find the man behind all this, that they would be strong enough to do so. The whole chapter thing barely registered to him at all, frankly.

Coming out of his musings as he felt cobblestones instead of dirt under his feet, Harry blinked then looking around, before staring over a series of houses to what was obviously the top of a church. "Well, I don't think we need to wonder about where the church."

"Most churches are ostentatious like that," Jaheira observed, disinterest and disapproval plain in her voice.

“S, s, some of them c, c, can be beautiful though,” Khalid added.

That caused Jaheira to scowl, but she also nodded in agreement. “Indeed, my husband, they can be. The ones in Athkatla, for instance. That entire region of the city is gorgeous. But all too many churches become symbols of self-aggrandizement of the local priests rather than the deity they are supposed to serve.”

Harry looked at the two half-elves. “Do either of you have problems with temples specifically?”

“A, a, are you asking if w, w, we have problems with s, s, specific religions?” Khalid asked in turn, before chuckling. “N, n, no, we do not. W, w, we prefer worshipping in the Elvish w, w, way, under the v, v, verdant green of the f, f, forest to Rillifane Rallathil. B, b, but we acknowledge o, o, other ways of worshipping t, t, the gods of Light and n, n, neutrality.”

Nodding, Harry didn’t reply verbally. Instead, he simply moved down the pathway leading deeper into Nashkel.

Inside the outer parapet, which wasn’t nearly as complete as it should be, there were two more farms, along with the tavern house called the ‘Belching Dragon Tavern’ they passed by before they met with the main road leading through the town north to south. From there, the church was even more obvious, one of the four largest buildings in the town. Its front lawn was marked by dozens of gravestones of various sizes.

There weren’t many people moving around this late, although when they passed another tavern, which marked itself is an inn, the noise of revelry was quite loud. Jaheira, however, frowned at it, her eyes narrowing, her long ears twitching. “That was not the sound of normal revelry. That was the sound of someone trying desperately to forget that there’s trouble abroad.”

Khalid chuckled darkly, his head canted to one side as they listened. “A, a, abroad nothing! That is t, t, the sound of people t, t, trying to forget t, t, there’s trouble right here in t, t, their own lives.”

Jaheira snorted, taking her husband’s hand and squeezing it briefly. “Forgive me, I misspoke.”

The taunting tone of her voice and the chuckle that Khalid let out told those around them this was a private joke, but Harry got the gist of it anyway and smiled faintly even as he thought about that and what else he was seeing. “Building a parapet, lots of nervous people, and... what is that clear area over there for, do you think? By the barracks.”

That area wasn’t lit by the torches that lined the main road or the entrances to the tavern and church, but Khalid and Jaheira, with their half-elf night vision, saw what was there easily. “A recently cleared zone, and lots of wood and stone. They are preparing to enlarge the

barracks. Preparation for war,” Jaheira growled. “We have not arrived a moment too soon, methinks.”

About ten minutes’ walk brought them to the church, which looked rather more like a church back in Harry’s old dimension than the one temple he had seen previously, the one to Garl Glittergold back in the Friendly Arm Inn. It had a single roof, which looked like any normal house’s roof, if much larger. But it’s four corners were marked with pillars leading up along the corners before rising even higher, tapering to odd little points Harry didn’t have a word for. The outer edifice of the temple was marked out by blue tiles in lines, and its front was marked by two long tapestries of blue.

Above the doorway was a large gauntleted hand made of stone. In the center of the back of the armored hand was an eye. This marked out the temple as belonging to Helm, the Watcher. Realizing this, Harry’s eyebrows rose in surprise, knowing that was one of the gods to whom Paladins swore allegiance to.

Entering the temple, Harry found that the interior looked like pictures of churches he had seen back in his old life. It had pews on either side of a single walkway, and at the front, there was a pew. Gauntleted fists here and there made out of marble stood alongside the walls, each of them marked with the All-Seeing Eye.

In the center of the church was an older man, although he wore armor. He turned as they entered, sizing them up in turn, his eyes alighting on Harry intently for a moment before smiling. And moving towards them. “Welcome, initiate. Have you come here to place yourself within the palm of the Vigilant One?”

Harry paused, cocking his head as he reworked what he had been about to say. “Is it that obvious?” he said instead while looking at the information which had popped up over his head. The man’s dot on his map was the blue of a normal civilian, the same for the guards before, but unlike the guards, who hadn’t gotten their own names in Harry’s AAS, this man did.

Name: Nalin. Priest of Helm.

A middle-aged man with the shoulders of an Adventurer and the eyes of a man of God, he is Nashkel’s resident priest and healer, a very important man around these parts. In other words, be polite. At the moment Nalin is looking somewhat careworn, and you notice that his eyes look sleep-deprived. Yet he still stands straight, and he holds a mace in one hand like he knows how to use it.

Note: as a priest, Nalin is something of a gray area between civilian and Adventurer. You will see information like the above on him, but no more, and he is not a threat to anything but your time.

“For those of us in the priesthood, yes, it is obvious that you are both a paladin and that you have not yet sworn yourself to the service of any particular God. To put it in layman’s

terms, your soul looks like it is white, a canvas that is yet to be painted the colors one of the gods of Light.”

When he saw Harry’s surprise and confusion, the man laughed. “Do not take it personally young one, that is simply an analogy, how I view it, not the reality. Of course your own experiences and beliefs will have already painted your soul in their colors. But I have forgotten my manners. I am Nalin, priest of Helm.”

Shaking his head, Harry decided to set this topic the side for now. “I would like to talk about Helm and his dogma. I come from Candlekeep, and the only God they give lip service to is Oghma. I know about the other gods, but not what the gods of Good would demand of their paladins. But that’s not why we came here right now. We have two companions who need to be revived.”

Nalin gestured to the pews to one side of him. “I can do that, of course. But we really do need to talk to one another. About that and something Oublek has no doubt told you about Captain Brage and what happened to him.”

Harry paused from opening his Item Box, looking at the man thoughtfully. “He did mention that, and I will tell you the same thing I told him. Captain Brage can’t be our priority going forward.”

“Indeed. While this Brage fellow could prove a threat to anyone he meets while trapped in his madness, you can see even in your own town the impact the iron shortage has had. It might well plunge the Sword Coast into war. That would cost far more lives in the end,” Jaheira added with a sigh.

The man looked between the two of them, then around at the others for a moment, before slowly nodding. “I agree that if you’re able to solve the mining issue, it will be a boon for the town and the surrounding area. However, what I wish to say about Brage is simple: I believe the man was cursed, not driven mad through natural means somehow. As such, if he is brought before to me whole of body, I could remove the curse.”

“That sounds far more feasible than someone simply going crazy overnight and spouting poetry. If we run into the poor man, we will endeavor to capture him rather than slay him out of hand,” Jaheira answered.

Harry raised an eyebrow at them, then chuckled and shook his head. “Well, I suppose that I will agree with our... illustrious leader...here. But how do you think he was cursed?” he drawled.

At her old joke being turned around on her, Jaheira had the grace to look a little abashed. But Jaheira was also happy that Harry was going along with her suggestion, earning him forty trust points with her, even as the game made yet another snarky comment at her expense. He ignored it, though, concentrating on what the priest was saying.

“Yes,” Nalin answered instantly. “His sword. He was reported to be wielding a sword in practice the day before he went mad and used the same sword to murder his victims. But Brage is not a swordsman normally. He has something of the skill set, but he very much prefers a mace, much like I do. He and I have sparred often enough over the years, and I know him. A claymore is not his chosen weapon. So if you can bring both man and sword back here, I will destroy the curse and weapon both.”

“I can’t promise that we will be able to look into this, or even capture him alive as you want. That will depend on how hard he fights us and what binding-type spells our group’s magic users have available to them at the time,” Harry warned. “But I can say we will try.”

So saying, Harry completed the motion of opening up his Item Box, and once more going through the motions of emptying out several of the things before coming to the bodies of Garrick and Edwin, one after another. Before the priest could speak, Harry held up the note Oublek had given him. “Oh, and I have a message from Lieutenant Oublek. We made a deal that you would only charge us a third of the normal price for the resurrections. We’ll pay full price on all your other spells, though.”

He handed the note Oublek had given them over, and the priest read it quickly, frowning a little before shrugging. “Very well. For you, a prospective Brother under the Eye of Helm, I will not quibble on this.” With that, he moved over to the two bodies, and Harry had laid out on the pews, placing his head on Garrick’s forehead. White and blue Light flared from his hand, running down into Garrick’s head and then down to the wounds in his side and chest, both of which closed as the others watched. The blue Light soon faded, and only the white was left, thrumming from every pore of the young Bard.

A second later, the Light faded, and Garrick’s eyes snapped open as he began to gasp, shaking, one hand going down to his chest and then his side. A groan of agony and remembered terror left him, a wail of shock as events slowly came back to him. “Ahhhhhhhh!!!”

Nalin has used: Resurrection.

This is a healing spell that can bring back the dead so long as their bodies are not missing the important bits. A man without an arm can be resurrected. A man without a head or a heart cannot be.

The resurrection spell only returns the user to life at about a twelfth of their overall health.

This meant that Garrick’s aches and pains were still there, minus the one killing wound he had taken. Harry was about to ask Nalin to use some healing spells on him when Garrick shrieked and began to thrash. This caused Nalin’s hand to fall off his head, and he stood up, grabbing at his weapon which he wasn’t carrying. “What, how, where! I, oh, oh god, I hurt so, so much, agghghh!”

“Garrick, calm yourself”, Jaheira soothed, reaching out to touch him, but he flinched away.

‘They’re right, Garrick,” Harry added.

This was followed up by Imoen and Khalid joining in. “You are safe. You are alive.”

Dynaheir added her own voice then. “Be calm, young man. You died but were brought back. It is a traumatic experience, I know. But you will soon be healed to full health if you but calm down and allow him to work.”

At the sound of another female voice, Garrick looked around, staring at Dynaheir, where she was being aided in standing by Minsc. “You, you’re the, the lady we were trying to rescue,” he stammered. “I, I...”

“Was this your first time being resurrected, young man?” Nalin soothed. “Do not worry. It can take even the strongest thus. But if you calm down, your druidic friend and I will heal you of your physical wounds. Your mental disorientation alas will not be so easily defeated.”

Garrick nodded convulsively, still staring around wildly, his whole body twitching. Jaheira began to intone healing spell of her own, her hands moving slowly so Garrick could track them, and between them, Nalin and Jaheira healed Garrick up to nearly full health.

That seemed to help Garrick calm down even more than Dynaheir’s voice had, but he still looked a little shocked to Harry’s eyes. *I think it was a good thing that we disarmed him at the same time I put his body into my Item Box.* At the same time though, Harry saw two messages appear in front of him.

Garrick has been resurrected. He knows however that he died during a battle that you were leading.

Due to the fear and horror this has evoked in the young Bard, you have lost all your accumulated respect and trust points with Garrick.

Right on the heels of this message though was another message which told Harry had, at the same time he’d lost all that progress, made up a goodly portion of it.

You have paid to have Garrick Resurrected. While he died under your leadership, this is still an act of amazing trust and kindness.

Due to this action, you have gained you have earned +200 Trust and +100 Respect with Garrick. You have 200/500 Trust, 100/500 Respect with Garrick.

When they were done healing Garrick, Nalin turned to Dynaheir. “Now for you, my dear. If my eyes do not deceive me, you are still suffering from both malnutrition and a brain injury. Let us see what I can do...”

Four spells later, all of which cost around a thousand gold and visibly tired the priest out, Harry was impressed. The malnutrition was still there but greatly reduced. And while she too looked tired, Dynaheir was standing tall, her black eyes were tracking very well, and her fingers were no longer twitching, something that only Jaheira had noted.

When it came to his turn to be seen to, Edwin dealt with being resurrected far better Garrick had. His eyes shot wide open, he gasped and grabbed at his chest, where the wound that had killed him had once been. Edwin then looked around, intelligence returning to his eyes quickly. "I see..." he rasped. "So, we were at least able to fall back. Or dare I think you were able to win, even without my most puissant self with you to the end?"

As Edwin spoke, Harry noticed two new messages appearing in front of him again.

Edwin has been resurrected. He knows however that he died during a battle that you were leading.

But this is not the first time Edwin has died. Therefore, you have only lost half your accumulated respect and trust points with him.

And next came the reaction to being resurrected page.

You have paid to have Edwin Resurrected. While he died under your leadership, this act of kindness is one so out of his realm of experience that it has utterly floored the Thayan, even if Edwin would never admit it.

Due to this action, you have gained you have earned +1000 Trust and +2500 Respect with Edwin. You have 1300/4000 Respect, 2490/4000 Trust with Edwin.

While Harry was reading that message, Edwin was looking at the woman we didn't know standing so near Minsc, the large barbarian standing with his hand on his sword hilt and assayed a smile. "Ah, so we did win, and this is the Witch. Interesting. I've never quite understood why the women of Rasheman are so dusky-hued, whereas the men are more typically pasty and pale like the addled one. Perhaps I will make that one of my questions that I will demand as recompense for my aid in your rescue."

"Be grateful that I believe that one's word and repaying aid is important, unlike you and the rest of you Thayans. Or else I would not have agreed to this questioning at any price that." Dynaheir sneered. "I understand from Minsc that if you do not return with your answers, that you would be in some trouble. Perhaps it would behoove you to act more grateful?"

"Yes, yes just as soon as you act grateful for being rescued from possibly be eaten or tortured to death." Edwin drawled looking over at Nalin, nodding with some, if scant, respect to the priest. "I believe that I can pay for some healing as well if you have such, priest."

Nalin's eyebrow rose in surprise at the group's odd interplay, as well as Hedwin's attitude. But he nodded slowly, raising his hand over Edwin, healing him until Edwin declared that he was back to two-thirds health, which was more than enough for now.

He pulled out some gold from his pouch, which he was somewhat surprised to still feel on his person. handing it over to Nalin as the priest told him the price. He then looked over at Harry and the others, nodding once to them. "Thank you. You need not have resurrected me after so short acquaintance, and while I know myself to be the most intellectual and suave of men, it takes a special individual to recognize that brilliance and work to keep it in the world."

"Has he always been this egotistical, or is it the shock of being resurrected that has made him forget to keep such thoughts within his own mind," Dynaheir quipped.

"Wow, you two are either going to kill one another or Fuck one another, I'm not sure which," Imoen snarked, the crudity of it's shocking both of them into silence for a moment.

Harry chuckled, shaking his head. "You're welcome. You decided to fight at our side and fought through several fights with us, so paying for your resurrection seemed only natural. Although if you and Dynaheir keep sniping at one another, I might come to change that opinion," Harry added hastily. "Now, do either of you need more healing?"

Edwin shook his head, though he added that he felt as weak as a day old kitten. Garrick didn't say anything. He was still looking shocked and somewhat out of his wits, though.

"Good." Clapping his hands, Harry turned to the half-elven couple. "Jaheira, Khalid, if you could lead our two recently resurrected companions along with Dynaheir and Minsc to the nearest inn, I would like to spend some time talking with this priest about Helm."

Edwin grimaced. "Of course it would be Helm, who else could it be but the most arrogantly self-important and self-righteous of the gods?"

"Edwin, could I ask you to wait on asking Dynaheir the questions that you will be asking her until I arrive? I'm not interested in the answers, but I think you might want Imoen and me there to help keep the peace."

"He speaks sense once more, astonishing. Yes, I will wait," Edwin replied. "To ask the questions, but not to get something to eat or drink."

With that, Jaheira nodded towards Harry, and led the way out of the temple.

OOOOOOO

Although he had concentrated on Dynaheir's presence, and what it might mean for his personal future in order to get over the shock of resurrection, that shock was still working its way through Edwin's system, and he moved slowly after the others, with Garrick beside him looking pasty-faced and pale even in the scant Light of the torches that illuminated the main

street of Nashkel. The walk to work to the tavern was silent, and slow because of this, which fit Edwin's desires perfectly. He had a lot to think about.

Not the resurrection itself. As part of their training, Red Wizards and even most wizards of any Order were forced to go through the resurrection process at least once. It was never pleasant, but Edwin knew he would get over it with time. What Edwin could not get over was the fact that someone else had gone out of their way to resurrect him. Someone Edwin had barely known for two perhaps as many as three days. That was shocking.

Of course, it also shows a strong grasp of my abilities and strength and how it adds to the party, and Harry might well have simply made the logical strategic decision that my aid is valuable going into the future. Or perhaps Imoen bugged him into it. I know she was taken with me, although perhaps sleeping with that dryad as I did to show Garrick how it is done might have offset some of her growing affections. And yet, and yet regardless of his reasoning, it does put me in his debt. A position one such as I am not suited to be found in.

And yet on the other scale side of that scale, there are some mysteries to be investigated here. Points of interest perhaps about how Imoen and Harry act at times, what they were able to accomplish during our assault on the now. Yes, there are questions.

"Tell me," he inquired after a few minutes thought, "how did we fare in the battle after I fell?"

At those words Garrick twitched, looking at Edwin, then the others and Edwin bit back a sneer. The boy was perhaps the most rabbit-like human he had ever met. *I had not thought him a great warrior before this, but was that truly his first brush with his own death?*

Not to Edwin's surprise, the half-elf wench was the one who answered him. "We won eventually. It wasn't easy, but we were able to eventually win through. The battle against the dungeon boss was dangerous indeed, and went down to the wire, as Imoen put it. But we won in the end. After that, we found ourselves on the second story of the keep from the majority of the remaining gnolls, where they were had gathered around the last respawn point. We created a killing ground there. Harry blocked the staircase up while we used tangling vines and fire to slay the gnolls below.

"Excellent. While I was not there personally, it always does the heart good to hear that such base creatures were burned alive. Especially after their chieftain got so lucky as to kill me. I will want to know how many days I was stuck in limbo and what all else has happened, but that is for later. Right now, I need a drink." Edwin ended, as they pushed their way into the inn's taproom.

"Here, here!" agreed Garrick and Khalid, causing Jaheira to facepalm and look at her husband in annoyance.

OOOOOOO

Back in the temple, Harry had sat down with Nalin on a pew with Imoen nearby, looking on interestedly. Nalin looked at her in confusion for a moment before shrugging. "You wish to know of Helm?"

"I wish to know more about the Watcher, and what precisely he would ask of his paladins. What kind of oaths would I be forced to swear in his service? Does he have his own Order of Paladins, or would I be expected to act on my own or become a member of the Radiant Heart?" Harry questioned.

Nalin nodded and then began to speak of Helm. He spoke of Helm's devotion to defense and to law and order. All the oaths that Harry would have to swear dealt with upholding those three things. "Indeed, of all the gods, perhaps only Helm is truly dedicated to the idea of law and order above everything else. Even his own thoughts of right and wrong."

"Is that why he killed Mystra?" Imoen interjected, having heard that story before.

Mystra, like all the other gods, was thrown out of Heaven for the transgression of a few, by Ao, the Over-God in the act that started the Time of Troubles. But she had attempted to somehow regain access to Heaven. Helm, charged by Ao to guard the gates of Heaven until the Tablets of Fate were returned to Ao, kept her from entering, eventually killing her.

"Helm was indeed forced to slay Mystra, goddess of magic," Nalin replied, sounding both sad and resigned. It was obviously a question he had been asked before several times. "But do not think that Helm took any joy in so harsh a duty, indeed after the act was done, great Helm wept, the tear becoming a crystal of such purity it has since been seen as a holy relic. Her death was simply what was required of him. Helm had been tasked with defending Heaven, of keeping the gods out until the thieves were forced to admit their folly. Was it a harsh duty? Yes. But justice often is."

"And Helm couldn't simply if I don't know, tried to talk her out of entering?" Imoen shot back.

"Do you think he did not? No one but the reborn goddess and Helm knows what truly happened in their clash. There were no other witnesses bar Ao, who would not take part in such. So no one can say how it truly started, why she was struck down beside the two of them. And even Mystra has not spoken of it. She even admitted her folly of attempting to enter without Ao's permission. Any idea that Helm simply attacked Mystra or struck her down in cold blood for the temerity of turning up once more at the gates of Heaven are completely spurious," Nalin responded, his tone hardening noticeably. "Do not make assumptions without all the facts."

Harry nodded thoughtfully at that, but he still looked a little dubious. "You haven't told me what specific oaths I would be required to swear. Or my question about Helm having a specific Order for his paladins."

“Helm has a single order of Paladins, called the Vigilant Eyes of Helm. They are a small Order as yet, having replaced the disgraced Companions of the One True Vision. Many other Paladins of Helm join the Order of the Radiant Heart. And as for Oaths, whenever a paladin swears to Helm, he is required to swear to five basic tenants and then four more beyond them by Helm himself, speaking through the priest who takes his vows. I have only done that twice in my lifetime. And both times, beyond the five starting tenants, they were very different.”

“Tell me of the five tenets then, and what other requirements you know of. And could I ask, if it isn’t so personal, what other vows the two paladins you took the oaths of had to swear?”

Nalin nodded and answered, his voice becoming deeper and more sonorous. The First one is simple: Never betray your trust. Give your word rarely, but if you do, keep to it as you would your Word of Honor to Helm himself. The second is to be fair and diligent in your conduct as you uphold the laws of Helm and whichever realm you find yourself in providing those laws follow the dictates of Helm. The third is to obey the orders of those raised above you by the laws of the land and the word of Helm unless those orders do not follow Helm’s justice.”

The priest chuckled. “The fourth and fifth are the most martial in tone, really. The fourth is to be vigilant. Stand, wait and watch carefully. Always be on the lookout for the evil in the world. Your foes will make themselves known. The fifth is to care for your weapons so they may perform their duties when called upon. Anticipate violence and be ready, but do not act rashly. Demonstrate purity of purpose in your role as a guardian and protector of the weak, poor, injured and young.”

Hearing these, Harry heard little he could argue about really, except...*Where’s the human element? I mean, there’s a bit there at the end, but there’s way too much emphasis on following orders and obeying the law. If I obeyed my superiors, Voldemort would have been resurrected, and I wouldn’t be here at all. And the laws of the land are, well just look at Amn, where the law basically is money makes the rules. I can’t see myself just blindly obeying those who have higher station than me. Yeah, way too much emphasis on obedience, and there’s no place in there for a person’s own ideas of right and wrong.*

“And um, the other Vows you’ve heard?” He asked, still thinking about what he had just heard and what they would mean if he sword to follow Helm.

Nalin chuckled once more, his eyes far away, staring into the past. “The first person I swore to the service of Helm was sent on a specific request and had to swear an oath of celibacy.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose at that, and Imoen squawked indignantly. “Now hold on! I know that’s not normal!”

“It was required for this man and his Paladin Quest, the quest every Paladin is sent on after swearing service to their God. He was being sent to kill a coven of sirens who lived north and west of here directly on the Sword Coast.”

“Why?” Harry questioned bluntly. “I mean, sirens are normally harmless, like dryads, right?” They did go rabid more often than dryads, but even so, it wasn’t exactly normal for them to be a threat to anyone who let them alone.

“Because they were sirens. They were preying on local fishermen, I assume,” the priest waved that off.

Harry’s eyes narrowed a little. “So, there were complaints from the fishermen?”

“Or their wives?” Imoen guessed with a wicked giggle. Like dryads, sirens were a female-only race.

“No, Aha!” there are no places where you could fish near here, so how could there be? The Watcher knew, and so this young Paladin was sent on this quest. The other was not given any specific quests but was tasked to head to Baldur’s Gate and to wipe out all treachery there. Helm had decided that he needed more presence in the city. It was becoming too lawless. Why there was even a sighting of a Drow there. Filth like that should be slain on sight. A single hero does not stand against an entire race devoted to death, and power through sex and torture.”

Harry frowned, leaning back in the pew. “I, I have heard about the killing of Mistral before, but your points on that topic were well thought out. And I like the idea of a protector, of always watching for danger and protecting the weak. But I think there must also be a human aspect to this. There must always be an ability to take each individual as I see them, and I think I think Helm is just a little too impersonal, too quick to judge for me. And far too quick to give and obey orders. I’m sorry.”

Nalin sighed. “It is not for everyone, the harsh duties of Helm. I will not proselytize further. But remember that you only can use your turn undead four times now, and your lay on hands once. You will not be able to do more than that until you swear to follow a god of Light. Only when you start obeying Helm and keeping his Laws will you gain true strength.”

Harry shook his head at that but thanked Nalin for the information before asking him what healing potions he had for sale, buying all of them. With that, he shook the man’s hand before leaving the church with Imoen. As they turned to the north, towards where the tavern was, he spoke up, looking over at Imoen. “So, what do you think?”

“I think he tried to sell you a bill of goods, and I think Helm is a little too full of himself for me,” Imoen answered without hesitation. “You?”

“That’s pretty much what I thought,” Harry sighed. “The problem is, I think that that is going to be an issue we’ll see with all the gods I can swear my service to as a paladin. None of

them are going to be as personable as I could wish. I was kind of worried about that while I was doing my character creation, but I was so worried about the idea of adventuring alone that I took it anyway for access to the healing spells.”

“That and the fact that you, like every other little boy, want to be the hero on the white horse, charging into danger,” Imoen teased. She didn’t often bring up Harry’s original age any longer, but right now, it seemed to be appropriate. Even so, Imoen idly wondered how long it would be before she simply forgot the fact that Harry had been a twelve-year-old boy before they came to this weird world.

“That too,” Harry flushed in embarrassment, looking away from the older girl’s knowing gaze.

“Good. I’m glad you’re not jumping at the first God to come along.”

“Everyone keeps saying that as if it was a possibility.” Harry sighed. “I’m not that stupid.”

“Not stupid, Harry. Well, at least I don’t think you’re stupid,” Imoen amended. “The dryad might have, or she might have known that the temple in this area was Helm, and Helm takes a dim view on dryad’s sirens, and so forth as we just saw firsthand.” Harry had mentioned the dryad’s advice on that score and on life in general to Imoen as they hiked through the woods.

“I think it’s more Helm frowns on anything that would take away humans free will than anything else. Although I could be wrong. But if you don’t think I’m that stupid, why...”

“The healing spells. Your Lay on Hands spell works as well as a minor healing spell, and you can’t tell me that having access to more of those wouldn’t be helpful. Hell, it might be the difference between life and death. But I don’t want you to make a decision that will affect the rest of your life for the good of the party instead of yourself.”

As she finished speaking Harry and Imoen both noticed a popup screen appearing in their line of sight.

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

In your quest to choose a God to swear your sword arm (or hammer arm) to, you have learned more about Helm. Despite agreeing with many of his tenants, you have decided that Helm’s idea of Order, Obedience, and Protection is not ‘human’ enough for you, coming with a bit more in the way of dogma and self-righteousness that you can stomach.

This decision is permanent, and you can no longer take up Helm’s Gauntlet in service to the Eternal Watchman.

This leaves you only Lathander, the Morning Lord, Illmater, the God of Martyrs and Tyr, God of justice and righteous war for you to choose from. Or does it?

The two of them stared at the message for a moment then looked at one another, shrugged and continued to the tavern. Asking for the room the two half-elves rented, they were directed to the third story of the inn, where Jaheira had purchased a room for three days, assuming that would be enough time for them to investigate the mines.

The room was the same size as the room they had rented back in the Friendly Arm Inn, at least in total floor area. But it wasn't nearly as nice, and it didn't have two separate area rooms attached to it for the men and women. Or, as they had broken down, for the married couple and the semi-siblings. Instead, the room was lined with beds on all three sides bar the interior wall, where a small table sat with several chairs around it. There Edwin and Garrick sat with the two Harpers, as Dynaheir laid out on a bed nearby with Minsc in a chair beside her.

When they entered, the first person to comment was Edwin, who looked at Harry coolly. "Dare I assume that you had enough basic intelligence that you did not swear yourself to Helm the Blindly Despotic?"

"I did not," Harry replied dryly, "or else a certain Red Wizard might well have been doing himself a favor by running right now, wouldn't he? After all, the red wizards are not known for their charity or good deeds."

Bah, whoever says charity says stupidity in the same breath," Edwin scoffed.

"I'll remember that the next time you need resurrecting."

Edwin scowled at that, but subsided, while Dynaheir sneered at him.

"I did not swear to Helm. Let us just say that Helm is a little too, too..."

"Sanctimonious," Imoen replied promptly

"That will work. And perhaps a little too arrogant that law and order mean right and just."

"Truly, you will find that in every God, Harry." Jaheira shook her head. "It is a rare divinity that admits that someone else might actually have a different point of view, and yet not be immediately thought of as wrong."

"Isn't that lovely," Harry sighed. "We really are made in their image, aren't we?"

Everyone there bar Minsc chuckled at that, and Harry looked around at Jaheira. "Dare I ask if they are willing to bring up some hot water and a tub? I can't be the only one who wants a bath right now, can I?"

"Indeed not!" Dynaheir practically shouted before the other two women could do so. "Although I am sad to say, I will probably need help to both enter and exit the tub."

"Actually, as bad as this room is, this inn has one thing going for it..."

“B, beyond their decent w, w, wine,” Khalid interjected.

Rolling her eyes, Jaheira went on. “It has a bathhouse. Two areas, men and women, with four tubs each.”

“Then I suggest we take advantage of it. After that, we’ll get some food to go with the wine you’re all drinking. When we all have full stomachs will be the time for some serious discussions. And yes, Edwin, that means your questions. Although I will demand that ask them politely.” Harry paused, then looked at the Red Wizard with a smirk. “If you can figure out how. We might need to find you a dictionary to teach you what that means.”

“Imbecilic Neanderthal! I know what polite is, I also know that it is best savored, used sparingly rather than spent willy-nilly,” Edwin shot back.

Harry chuckled at that, shaking his head, amused by the wizard’s attitude. He had the snarky attitude and the sarcasm down far better than Snape or Malfoy, and yet he lacked the personal hatred of either, which made it easy for Harry to deal with.

Harry was also amused to note that his stance on Helm had won him some respect from both magic users. Yet that overall, Harry was closer to the point where respect and trust would merge into friendship with Edwin than with Dynaheir despite the saving her from the Gnolls thing. It amused him, although he was still somewhat put-off by the idea that the AAS had told him about the two of them no longer being able to become a couple.

The boys and ladies left the room and split off at the entrance to the bathing area, with Minsc very reluctant to let Dynaheir out of his sight. He was forced to do so by her shout of “Will you leave off, Minsc! I like that you are so protective of me, and I understand where your concerns are coming from. But I truly doubt that anyone is about to assassinate me in the lady’s bathhouse in Nashkel.”

It turned out that Dynaheir was completely correct. No one was going to assassinate **her**. The assassins had a different target entirely.

Harry, Khalid, Minsc, Garrick and Edwin filled up the men’s side of the bathhouse, each of them with their own copper tubs and warm water.

“Even though this will no doubt open me up for japes, I must say it. I feel alive again,” Edwin announced with a pleased sigh as he laid his head back against the head of the tub, allowing the water to come up to his chin.

Harry chuckled but did not follow up on the obvious opening there, too busy enjoying his own bath.

Nearby, Minsc grumbled, and all the others had noticed that he had laid out his claymore by the tub, instead of by Khalid’s weapon by the door. Of course, even naked Harry

had access to his Item Box, so he wasn't truly unarmed, even if you discounted the blood magic spells. But it still amused Harry that even here, Minsc was prepared to leap into action.

"How can you be so blasé about it!" Garrick grumbled, shaking his head from where he sat in his own tub, clasping his knees to his chest. "That was the most terrifying thing I've ever..."

Edwin sighed theatrically. "You have ever, not I. To be a wizard is to brush with death, to be an adventurer more so."

"Don't let him fool you, Garrick," Harry warned, leaning back in his own tub. "Edwin is probably feeling the effects of being resurrected just like you. But this wasn't the first time for him."

"It, it gets easier than?"

"Not at all," Khalid, Edwin and Minsc replied together, causing Harry to blink at them all.

"E, e, every time you d, d, deal with the disorientation, t, t, the impact of having l, l, lost two or three d, d, days of your life, the j, j, jarring sensation of moving from o, o, one place to another, o, o, of being suddenly elsewhere, w, w, where you knew a, m, m, moment ago you were d, d, dying," Khalid expanded.

"I hope to never find out," Harry shuddered. And that was the truth, and not just for himself either. As the gamer, he wasn't certain what would happen to Imoen if he died, or, if, as someone who had technically been kind of slotted into the life and body of someone else, that Harry would be the one to come back from such a thing.

Minsc Then began to regal them with the times – he'd died and been resurrected six times – he had died, each time more lurid and heroic sounding than the last. This continued until Harry noticed Garrick was going green, and Khalid was starting to flinch a bit. Harry then asked Minsc to quit, and the bathhouse fell silent, just enjoying the water and the fact they were getting clean for the first time since leaving Beregost.

As the water was starting to go cold, Harry was considering the idea of using a fire spell underneath the water to heat it up once more, and more particularly, how to get away with it with Edwin there. But before he could convince himself to instead get up and out of the tub because he was turning prune, the door opened.

At first, no one seemed visible there, then there was a flash, and a man stood there, the same moment a blinking red dot appeared on Harry's map. His shout of warning was cut short as a cloud of bilious green fog formed in the doorway before shooting into the room, expanding quickly to fill the entire bathing area. Seeing it coming, Harry ducked under into the water, praying that whatever this was, it wouldn't be able to affect him through the water.

An unseen Enemy has cast Stinking Cloud.

This is a Level 2 Evocation type spell that will knock its victims unconscious. Worse, causing victim pain will not cause them to wake up.

Those who hold their breath can leave the cloud without suffering any ill effects, although those remaining in the area covered by the cloud must continue to hold their breath until the cloud dissipates.

Grimacing, Harry kept on holding his breath as he stared above him out of the water into the air above the copper tub. Thankfully, it seemed as if the cloud was indiscriminate, as there was no immediate follow-up attack, allowing Harry to pull out his sword from his weapon's space. This was no time for half-measures.

Soon Harry's breath left him, and he was forced to hold himself in the water through will alone, thrashing slightly as his body demanded he rise and take a breath. But Harry refused to give in to the urge, taking minus one to his health every second he remained underwater. Soon Harry had lost fifteen health, and when the cloud vanished – not dissipated, but simply disappearing – he burst out of the water, standing up in the tub so violently it rocked his bath onto its side

Edwin was the only one who had somehow kept his senses. He had leaped out of his own tub and retreated to the corner, trying to hide behind Khalid's copper tub as he eyed the two who had just entered warily. As Harry gasped in a lungful of air, he heard the other man mutter, "So, my enemies among the Red Wizards have found me again?"

The other three were all unconscious, slumped against the side of their tubs, all of them having moved to try and pull themselves out of the tubs before the cloud had hit. This meant they weren't in danger of dying at least, but they weren't going to be any help now.

Out of the doorway came a woman in chain mail, charging forward with a club raised. "It might be unladylike, but I'm gonna have to bash your head in, I am!"

Name, Neira:

Race: human

Class level Six Cleric.

Attitude towards you: You're a bounty mark. It's not personal. She just has to kill you for the money.

A Cleric of a Neutral Evil Dark God, Neira moonlights as an assassin on top of being a cleric. No, it doesn't make sense, but there you go. Other than that, she's charging forward to engage you with a club rather than trying to use any offensive spells she might have. What this says about her general level of intelligence should be obvious.

Behind her, a man was moving in from the now-closed doorway. In both hands he held axes, and as the woman charged Harry, he raised one, hurling it over her shoulder towards Harry.

Name: Nimbul

Race: Human

Class: Level 5 Mage/Thief

Attitude towards you: See the Axe hurled towards your head.

A low level Dual-class Adventurer, this man has the abilities of a low-level thief and mage. While this makes him dangerous, it will also have severe penalties to his stamina, health points, and indeed anything physical beyond dexterity. What he can use in terms of weapons and gear will also be sharply limited. This could be why he isn't even wearing a leather cuirass like any sane thief.

Harry used his other quick-slot to pull his Tower Shield out of his Item box, blocking the incoming axe and sending it skittering to one side. Then he was smashed out of the tub by the power of the woman's club strike, slamming into his shield it caused him to stumble, upending him to the floor. Only the tower shield saved him from the next blow as he sprawled out with his legs still caught by the side of the tub, but a hasty kick caused Neira to back away just enough for Harry to get rid of his weapons for a moment and twist around, getting his legs out of the tub and rolling to one side before once more equipping them.

Edwin was no help, at present, having just been forced back into hiding behind the tub as another throwing axe was hurled his way. It nearly clipped Khalid instead but flew on to crash into the wall.

Meanwhile, Harry had finally gotten his feet under him and now was blocking Neira's furious blows while stabbing out with his own sword. She took it on her own medium shield and replied with a blow that came in on Harry's leg, his shield out of position due to moving in to position to block an axe thrown at Harry from the advancing Nimbul. As he stumbled back in pain, the blow nearly having deadened his leg though not strong enough to break his bones, Harry found his sword locked with the woman's club.

For a moment, Harry was about to decide to use his Blood Magic spells, but then Boo was there, running up the woman's leg. "Whaggg, what the heck!?"

This cost her as Harry stabbed forward, his blade impacting along her side. The tip of the sword didn't quite penetrate enough to kill the woman thanks to the splint mail the woman was wearing, a better version of chain mail. But the impact still cracked ribs and caused her to stagger away, going to one knee in agony.

Harry twisted around, forced to take another axe from Nimbul but then charged forwards toward him. With the woman injured and probably going to take a moment to use a healing spell, the man was now the immediate threat, and his axes could also do more damage if they landed. The Cleric's club couldn't kill Harry unless she got in a shot to his head.

As he charged towards the axe-thrower, Edwin had moved around the room and was by Minsc. He had no attack spells left, his memorized spells having all disappeared due to his death. But on his hands, he wore a few rings with single spells on them. Two of them contained Dispel Magic. He used the charge on the second such ring on Minsc now, knowing he would be more aid than Khalid, having brought his claymore with him. Indeed, he had noticed Harry's sword and shield and was wondering about them, adding that into his earlier observations.

But now was not the time for such things. "Wake up, buffoon! We are under attack!"

Harry took too more blows to the shield from the throwing axes before he reached the man. A desperate hack from one axe was deflected to the side, and then Harry's longsword +1 slashed forward. When his blow hit, the observation Harry's AAS had noticed before was proven correct: Nimbul didn't have much health to speak of, and no armor. The Magically enhanced blade slashed upwards at an angle opening his side and up to his chin, sending him stumbling backward in a welter of blood as he gurgled to his death.

Turning, Harry was expecting to see Neira charging him again, and the woman had indeed turned in his direction. But she only took two steps before Minsc was there, bringing his sword downwards from behind and slightly to the side as he leaped out of his tub. The neutral evil Cleric barely had a second to turn before the large Claymore clove down through her shoulder and into her body. Kicking the dead body off of the blade, Minsc snarled. "Assassins! Were they after my Witch as well?"

"I doubt it, Minsc," Harry replied as he began to calm down, while nearby, Khalid finally began to rouse from the effects of the stinking cloud. He reached down, and after sending his tower shield back to his item box, grabbed up a towel left by the doorway, tying it around his middle with shaking hands. "This isn't the first time I've been attacked by assassins. I'd wage both of these have bounty notices on them too."

As his aches and pains started to register, it was only the Gamer's Mind that kept Harry from hyperventilating at how close he had been to dying just there, especially after the earlier discussion of resurrection and his own thoughts on the matter. *If not for his Item Box abilities, and Minsc, that could've gone badly indeed. Dammit, I completely froze, forgot about my blood magic spells! Of course, there's Edwin here and, oh crap...*

inwardly Harry cursed, turning to glance over at Edwin, who was already looking at him speculatively, playing with his goatee with one hand as the other held a towel to cover his lower regions. "That was most interesting, and most lucky for you, that the first thing you take out of your Item Box is a weapon. Unless, of course, weapons are all you have in its present?" The way he posed that question made it clear that he would not believe that answer, and Harry scowled.

"Actually, yes. Remember, I had to carry you and Garrick's carcass in there. So my weapons really were the only thing in there." With that, Harry got out of the tub and moved

over to the body, searching it quickly, if nowhere near as quickly as he would have without Edwin there.

Edwin chuckled at that, moving past Harry to where their clothes had been left in cubicles along the inner wall. "Oh yes, most interesting. Regardless, I believe that we are now even. Unless you think that you could have continued to fight both attackers without my waking up the barbarian."

"Heh, maybe, maybe not. But if you want to call us even on that Edwin, that's fair enough," Harry shot back, moving over to help a still out of it Khalid and Garrick as they both came to. He paused to slap Minsc on the shoulder, saying, "Tell me whatever Boo's favorite food is, and I will prepare it tonight, my large friend. Your giant miniature space hamster saved my life there." He snorted, looking over at Edwin. "In fact, he was just as much help as you were, Edwin."

"Hmmp!" the wizard scoffed, even as a smirk appeared on his face, amused by how well Harry was handling this attempt on his life.

Staring at them and then around at the ruins of the bathhouse, a now-aware Garrick shook his head, shivering and not because of the now only lukewarm bathwater. "I'm done," he announced, and for some reason, Harry felt that he was talking more about than just about the bath.

Minsc on the other hand had knelt by the woman's body, finding the message about Harry's bounty, shaking his head in disgust. "The forces of evil truly have no honor to do this, as if it is but the work of a moment to pay for someone's life! Truly evil knows no bounds right Boo?"

At that word, the hamster appeared on his shoulder, and Harry chuckled, while Garrick and Khalid slowly got out of their tubs. Meanwhile, the rest of the world finally decided to notice what had been going on, and shouts of alarm and the stamp of boots reached his ears from outside.

Of more immediate interest to Harry though was the bounty notice Minsc handed to him, which he read through quickly. It had more information than the others, including two names: Tazok, and Tranzig.

The Main Quest **Vengeance or Justice** has been Updated.

You now know the names of two of your ultimate enemies henchmen. Weather they are major players in his organization is not apparent just yet, nor where they might call home, but both were implicated in the transfer of funds to Nimbul and Neira. Despite having no other clues, this is still more than you had before. Perhaps tracing their route might prove a good idea?

Rewards: Beyond staying alive, who cares?

On top of that, both attackers had some decent equipment on them, which Harry divest them of as Edwin answered the pounding on the door by sticking his head out, a bland, “And what kept you simpering fools hmmm?” on his lips as he smirked at Imoen and Jaheira, both covered in towels and the inn’s owner standing behind them.

Harry ignored the subsequent shouting match in favor of identifying two items of interest among the attackers gear.

Ring of Infravision: 'Topsider's Crutch'.

Merchants that dare the risks of trading with the Drow of the Great Rift are often given these items to aid in their movements underground.

Gives the wearer infravision, the ability to see better in the dark.

This was accompanied by another short sword +1 for their collection, and a helmet. It was a full helmet, covering everything but the eyes, and it was called The Eyes of Truth:

Eyes of Truth: Helmet of Infravision.

A relic of a past Adventurer who made a point of entering the deepest and darkest caves she could find. This was one of the secrets to her success

Gives the wearer infravision, the ability to see better in the dark.

After the incident was fully explained to the innkeeper, the men met up with the womenfolk back at the room to find Jaheira tapping her foot on the ground in annoyance, while Dynaheir looked somewhat amused and chagrined. “Truly, I did not think I would be tempting fate so much with my last words to you before we split off, my large friend.”

Jaheira ignored this as she, after making certain her husband was alright, turned on Harry, tapping his chest with a demanding finger. “Is it possible, Harry, that you can enter in a tavern or inn and **not** cause trouble?”

“It does seem to be a trend,” Harry said mildly, although his eyes flashed warningly at her, and along with a toothy smile made Jaheira realize that he wasn’t exactly happy about being attacked every time he turned around either and didn’t need to be taken to task about things outside his control.

With a slight apologetic nod, she subsided, shaking her head while Khalid simply smiled slightly, moving to her side. As he did, Harry blinked at a new message that had just popped up in front of him, confusion filling him. Only his recent training in not reacting to these messages kept him from gaping.

Congratulations. You have earned 50 respect from Jaheira.

Just...what? Maybe she likes how you stand up for yourself? Women are weird. This is not the first, nor the last time that sentence will appear before you.

“The foods here,” Imoen announced mildly, her eyes raking Harry up and down, searching for any injuries. Finding none beyond bruises, Imoen smiled slightly. “Did the message on the assassin tell us anything new?”

Minsc and Harry exchanged smiles at that, as Harry spoke of the two names mentioned in the message. It wasn’t much, but it was something they could follow up on after they were done in the mines. Then Harry added, “But apparently my head’s only worth six hundred gold. I’m getting insulted really. What with all of the assassins we’ve killed so far, you’d think that word would get around that taking my head is not exactly cost-effective.”

Garrick looked at the food on the table laid there by a few of the inn’s workers a moment before, then around at the others, all of whom were joking and chuckling at the recent brush with death, even Harry quipping about having to pay for another bath for Minsc in the same breath as he thanked Minsc for his help while everyone bar Dynaheir, whose body was still weak, took a chair at the table. The blasé attitude towards the near death experience made Garrick’s mind up for him, and his face firmed.

He took a gulp of the wine, then set his cup down resolutely even as Edwin began to speak. “Now, before we get too deep into our cups, perhaps I shall ask my questions of the Witch before all of us are to replete with food and wine to concentrate on such serious matters.”

“Before you say anything, I have something to say too,” Garrick interrupted the goateed man, most rudely in Edwin’s opinion. “I’m done.”

When the others looked at him in confusion, Garrick went on. “I know I told you I wanted to travel with you all. To help discover what was causing the iron shortage, but this whole thing, with the fighting the gnolls and, and my death, I, I am seriously having second thoughts about being an adventurer. I think at this point, I’ll just stick to being a bard. Adventures are something that should only happen in stories.”

“I see,” Harry leaned back, looking at the Bard. A part of him had expected this seeing how twitchy the young man had been. *Although come to think of it, isn’t Garrick a little older than me? But then again, I had my first brush with death before I even came to this world. Heck, three brushes with death. First, the troll with Hermione, then Voldemort’s spirit in the forest and then at the end of the year with Quirrell.*

“I will be sorry to see you go, Garrick, but I understand your decision. The adventuring life is not for everyone” Harry answered with a nod. “And being a bard, I don’t doubt you’ll find work here for you to do, or wherever you wish to go from here.” Harry said, while internally, his mind had moved on to what this meant, and specifically, how to make certain that the Bard

didn't blab some of his and Imoen's secrets. Garrick wasn't the best when it came to keeping secrets, and like Jaheira, he knew way too many of Harry's for his liking.

Before he could think of what to do about that, or even say anything further, Imoen spoke up, once more showing how quick she was on her mental feet.

Imoen hopped to her feet, moving around the table toward Garrick. "In that case, come on Garrick. I'll join you for a last drink or two-dozen, okay? And tomorrow, once you're over your hangover, heh, we'll give you your share of the gold he took from the Knolls, and one of the emeralds we found there. That'll be a great going-away present, right?"

"Emeralds! Those are expensive...erm, I mean, I, did you really find some in, um..." Garrick trailed off, completely disarmed by the offer of both drink and gold and the fact Imoen had sidled up to him, pulling one of his arms into her chest.

Imoen has used Flirty Little Lass.

Imoen has used her body and wiles to cloud Garrick's mind.

Garrick is now Charmed.

Garrick never noticed Imoen nodding slightly to Harry, or how Harry's brows furrowed before he nodded. It looked as if Imoen had a plan, and Harry decided to trust this problem to her. Thus, with a series of farewells, Garrick left the room, with Imoen on his arm.

But Harry had been watched by Edwin. The Red Wizard made certain to not react, ostensibly staring into his wine glass but put this little tidbit alongside several other interesting factoids he had noted with his mighty intellect about the two youngsters from Candlekeep. It was very evident to him that the two had some secret, something that impacted their abilities in combat. And further, that they were determined to keep it. *Well, more power to them in that. But is this secret a learnable skill, or something else I can take advantage of. First things first, however.*

After taking a deep drink of his wine, Edwin set it down with a sneer for the vintage before looking over at Dynaheir.

"Now, with the ignoramus out of the way, perhaps we should get onto more important matters. Me and my questions for you, Witch." With a smirk on his lips, Edwin produced parchment and ink, along with a rather delicate, well-crafted quill.

Dynaheir grimaced angrily, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair, reminding Harry strongly of some of the older girls in Hogwarts when they were being annoyed with one of the boys for some reason, causing a faint smile to appear on Harry's face, but he wiped it away quickly. This was a good thing considering the fact Dynaheir shot a look towards Harry. He blandly looked back at her, shrugging his shoulders.

Scowling, she turned back to Edwin. "Very well! Ask your questions. Ten, and only Ten. I will not answer a single question more."

"Have no fear Witch, I know well the price I earned. And speaking of, if I decide to split off Harry, I will demand some of that cash and one or two of those emeralds you mentioned."

"You can have one emerald, and seven-hundred and fifty gold on top of it. That'll be your share of the gold, minus the amount I had to pay for your resurrection," Harry replied promptly.

Edwin snorted at that, but nodded agreement. It was after all a very fair allowance of money, and he was in no position to demand further.

With that, Edwin turned back to Dynaheir, fingers tapping together as he steeped his hands on the table. "They well. I suppose the first question I should ask, is what precisely is the nature of your Precognition powers? The source of it."

"Yes that is the first question you should ask," Dynaheir answered instantly, before falling silent.

Edwin narrowed his eyes, and Harry coughed. "Dynaheir remember, Edwin died to help us get you out of there."

"And I well remember that and remember that you were no position to demand payment of it in this manner." Dynaheir's shot back grimly, before sighing. "But very well. I cannot tell you how the precognitive abilities passed on. It is more shamanistic in nature than magical. A series of different potions imbibed over time after a Witch is recognized as having magical powers gives us the ability to communicate with the Spirits and see through the skein of the future."

Edwin scowled at that and wrote it down and was about to ask what the ingredients of those potions were before frowning. "Wait. I recall that occasionally, young witches have been taking in raids before the main attacks or invasions were launched, apparently surprising Rasheman despite the precognition powers of you and your fellows. All of them died within a week. These potions: if you stop taking them before a certain point, do they kill you?"

"That is correct," Dynaheir replied, her tone grave and bitter at the mention of kidnapped young witches. "To be a Witch of Rasheman is to walk with death."

Edwin snorted. "In that, you apparently have more in common with Red Wizards than you may wish to think." With that, Edwin used three more questions on the type of potions, the number of times one had to be taken, whether or not there was any way to wean someone off them before she fully came into her shamanistic powers. Unfortunately, while Dynaheir answered those questions, she could not tell him what manner of concoction these potions were. The secret of their creation was one only the most senior Witches ever learned, of which there were a scant hundred scattered across Rasheman.

With a sigh, he left that behind. If the potions were what he termed alchemical rather than magical, there was scant little the Thayans would be able to do to discover its secrets. But that did not mean there weren't other things that he could learn from the Witch. From there, he asked about how the Witches' foresight worked, and in particular, why Witches went abroad so often.

"You do not even know that when you Red Wizards have dogged the steps of many a sister?" Dynaheir scoffed, shaking her head. "You truly know nothing."

Edwin glared at the woman. "At least we have actually created a culture instead of mere tribalism squatting in the fields, defecating out rules, ideas and self-righteous buffoons, blind to the issues their ways of life cause them."

Harry and the half-elven couple all privately thought that series of insults were kind of strange, not having the background necessary to understand their import. But they did seem to strike for some reason, and Dynaheir glared angrily back at him.

"Why do I have an urge to send them both to their corners until they learn to play nice?" Jaheira snarked in a mocking whisper to Harry. Harry smirked, elbowing her very lightly in the side, while Khalid chuckled on her other side.

This caused the two magic users to glare equally at all three of them, until Minsc boomed out, "Boo thinks you are both being rather silly, and are indeed acting like young children, unwilling to share. Boo and Minsc well know that there are deep, troubled waters between the Red Wizards and Rasheman, and as representatives, you need to act thusly. But from the outside, if you strip away that aspect, it all sounds silly. And it is not like these issues are personal, after all. The Red Wizard has only followed us for a few months, and you, my Witch, never participated in any battles against Red Wizards before."

"Personal, no. But the Red Wizards have tried to conquer Rasheman more than a dozen times in our lifetimes, Minsc! I will not forget that!"

"Because you are blocking our rightful expansion," Edwin shot back easily. "We need the resources and the space Rasheman represents. It has never been personal, or based around hate, only power." He finished, as if that made it all better.

"You say power, but the fact that you are here means that you are not high within the Red Wizards does it not? Who really gains from your conquests? Not the common man, not your common wizard, only the Lords of your group." Dynaheir retorted, a sneer on her face. "Face it. You call me a barbarian, and I will cheerfully say that I am such. But at least I am no man's pawn, no man's willing slave."

Edwin snarled, and made to stand up, but Harry rapped the table with a knuckle sharply, growling out, "Enough." *Heh, now I know maturity doesn't equal age. Good grief, even after*

admitting they've never been involved in these wars between their nations they can't let their anger subside.

“By my count Edwin, you have two questions left after Dynaheir answers this last one. Make them count, and then we can go want to other topics, ones that will hopefully not have the two of you at one another’s throats. I will say this now, if you both stay within my adventuring cadre, I will demand a certain level of professionalism. You don’t have to like one another, but you will have to work together.”

The two magic users scowled, but Dynaheir eventually turned back to Edwin. It was evident that even if she was not willing to bury the hatchet, she was happy that she had gotten in the last word of this latest exchange. “As to your question as part of their last training exercise, every Witch is given a vision quest. With the aid of an older, more learned Witch, we send their minds out to the future, further than we have ever done, not to the future that is certain, but the future that is only possible.”

“The realm where other prognosticators dwell,” Edwin sneered, but rote that down as well.

“They see dangers to the world, which can come in various guises, and are then sent with a guard chosen from among the warrior tribes, one who is also set to leave Rasheman as part of their Dajeema. Together they seek out this great danger to the world and deal with it however they may.”

“And your search brought you to the sword Coast? Intriguing. And no, that was not one of my questions.” Edwin added hurriedly. “You are here, I can therefore extrapolate what your goal, or rather what this great evil might be.”

For his last two questions, Edwin changed the topic of questioning to how the images appeared to Dynaheir, how detailed they were and how they could figure out which future had the best odds of occurring, thus knowing which they needed to interact with quickly. Grinding her teeth, Dynaheir answered all of the questions, knowing that she was giving away secrets, but knowing that she couldn’t give Edwin the one answer he wanted, the formula for the potions that witches were given to attain their precognitive powers.

“And that’s ten,” Harry interjected himself smoothly into the conversation at that point. “I also think you’re running out of parchment anyway, Edwin.”

Edwin blinked and looked down at the parchment he had been using. His handwriting was small and neat without a single blot. Edwin would dare say that even one of the vaunted Candlekeep Keepers would not be able to match his precise notetaking. Yet there was no denying the fact that the parchment was full. He waited a moment, then send it to the side with small weights at either corner, using a tiny cantrip on the quill, running it above the parchment to instantly dry the ink.

“Indeed, much of that was fascinating. The majority of it amply confirmed what we already knew, but everything about the precognition was new, including its origins. I am well compensated for my brush with death, I feel. Thus the question becomes, where do we go from here?”

As he posed that question, Edwin tensed. Now that the agreement between them was completed, a Red Wizard would not hesitate to stab him in the back, then dump his body out the window. Perhaps with some of the local rotgut spilled on it, to make it seem as if he had stumbled out a window and broken his neck. That was the type of life that Edwin had led, a life where people could be stabbed in the back almost as easily as they can breathe, where every day without a dagger in your back was a victory.

“Do you wish to continue traveling with us?” Harry riposted, before looking over at Dynaheir and Minsc. “

“What are your long and short term goals? I... am unwilling to go directly back to Thay. My being given this assignment, you understand that a few individuals might still be searching for me due to certain misunderstandings,” Edwin scowled, not liking to admit that Dynaheir had been close to the mark with her earlier comments.

Harry thought for a moment, then answered, choosing his words carefully. “My long term goal is justice for my murdered stepfather. I was brought up in Candlekeep by a man named Gorion, a former adventurer. When it became time in my training as a paladin to go out and find a god to pledge myself to, we were ambushed barely two hours away from Candlekeep. Since then, as you discovered earlier Edwin, whoever was behind that ambush has taken to hiring assassins to dog my steps. So both justice and self-preservation demand that I remove this individual.”

You have learned +20 respect, +80 trust with Edwin.

Edwin evidently is astonished yet happy with the fact that you're not automatically attacking or killing him at the moment now that your agreement is done. He is also understanding of your cause.

“Due to some of the things that we found on one of the attackers persons, we believe this individual is connected to the iron troubles that are currently spreading across the sword Coast. I intend to do what I can to halt that scheme, while growing in strength and ability as I do,” Harry finished.

“Which is why you are here,” Dynaheir nodded. “Your cause is just. But there is more, is there not? There is some reason, not safety, not anger, not greed or past wrongs made right by perpetuating violence through you and Gorion. Something else drives this individual to see to your death. What is it?”

Realizing this could be a way to shift any interest or scrutiny about his various abilities to another, more acceptable target than his AAS system, Harry decided to start slowly, as if reluctant to share this. "We, That is, Gorion was not my real father, as I said. But he, he believed that perhaps my father's legacy might be more than mortal. And given my strengths, my physical and mental abilities, and my age, along with rumors that Jaheira and Khalid passed on, I..."

Both Dynaheir and Edwin were of well above normal intelligence. They worked out what all that might mean for themselves, and Edwin's eyes widened in surprise. "So the rumors are true, the God of murder might well have left behind progeny? Yourself and, perhaps, this individual? I have heard of such, but never before met someone who professed to be a son of Bhaal."

"We prefer to call him the Murder-manwhore, actually," Harry replied mock-primly. Dynaheir laughed at that, while Edwin looked a little startled. "What? He's dead, it's not like he's going to care. And do you have any idea how many women he must've slept with? Thousands. If he was not a manwhore, what was he?"

Still laughing, Dynaheir nodded. "Hehehe, y, you are attempting to tell us that being with you is dangerous. Once more, you wish to have Minsc and me at the least to join you with an open eye to what that could mean."

"Garrick and Edwin dying was a bit of a wake-up call for me, no matter how short their deaths ended up being," Harry admitted. "I don't like having people die around me, but it's worse if you all don't know the severity of the issue that you're getting involved in."

"Acceptable," Edwin snorted. "At present, at any rate. Although I would hesitate to be so open in the future."

Harry chuckled at that, while internally, Edwin frowned. "What exactly does that entail for you personally? Most of that sort tend to be more violent, more unrestrained, with a strong pension towards violence."

"Whereas I don't have any of those," Harry said cheerfully. "I'm good at violence, but I could certainly not be involved in violence any further and be quite happy. However, I do seem to have a few skills that most adventurers do not. I have the ability to access my Item Box freely. I'm also stronger and faster, and a little more durable I think than most adventurers at my level."

At the mention of levels, Dynaheir shook her head slightly. "Hehe, A son of the God of murder who wishes to become a paladin, to serve one of the gods of Light. That is certainly an interesting development."

"I am not that asshole's son! He might have somehow convinced my mother to sleep with him once, under circumstances I have no idea nor desire to look into. But my father is

Gorion. I acknowledge the connection to the Murder-whore, but not to him as an individual or his creed,” Harry growled out fiercely.

“Good,” Dynaheir and Edwin said together, surprising one another, and making them each shoot looks of anger across the table at the other.

After a moment, Dynaheir continued. “Despite the use of True Sight being venerated in Rasheman, I firmly believe that every man can make his own destiny. We, Minsc and I, will continue to travel with you.”

“Yes!” Minsc shouted, thrusting his sword up to the ceiling. “More travels with Harry, with Imoen, with Jaheira of the sharp tongue and Khalid of the mighty blade! Butt-kicking for goodness!”

Tapping his fingers on the table, Edwin's thoughts flickered like lightning, ignoring the other's laughter at Minsc's over the top attitude. With what he had about the witches, Edwin could return home, turn in his report, and be assured that at least for a while, one high Lord would be protecting him from the anger of another. *And yet if I could return with those answers and the strength I am certain to gain from being around this one and the troubles he causes, perhaps even figuring out a way to harness that power for myself... yes, he mused. I believe it is better to stay with this goody-to-shoes and his followers. And in the future, perhaps they will be better meat shields than in this last venture.*

“I believe that I will stay with you as well, at least for now. I will be forced to leave you if you go to Baldur's Gate. I have been warned away from that city,” he added, with a scowl on his face. “But I will travel with you until you turn your attention there. Which I predict you most certainly will. Wherever this conspiracy ends, it will have its hooks deep into Baldur's gate as well. Nothing happens on the Sword Coast that does not eventually lead back to that city.”

Jaheira nodded sharply. “Good. In that case, might I suggest that we adjourn the serious portion of this discussion? Tomorrow, we will ask the mayor about access to the mines, and then will head down into them. Until then, let's see what information we can gather in the taproom.”

Edwin scoffed, waving one hand. “Begone with you. I have no wish to rub all elbows with the plebeians, and a few moments of quiet time alone with the wine will be quite nice.”

Harry nodded, but then added, “Might I suggest though that you stock up on defensive spells tonight and fewer fireballs? I can't imagine explosive type magic inside an enclosed space like a mine is a good idea.”

“I'll take your words under the appropriate level of advice,” Edwin sneered, but it was a somewhat good-natured one as Harry pushed the bottle of wine towards him. He saluted the younger man, then leaned back his chair, pulled out a book from somewhere, and began to read, occasionally sipping at the wine.

Dynaheir, on the other hand, nodded at Harry's words as she considered how best to integrate herself into the rest of the group, leaning back in her bed and pulling out her own spellbook. With there no longer being just the two of them, and further the environment they were going into, summoning spells and various hold person magics which she specialized in would be of limited utility. *Summon Monster might still be good, but perhaps invocation-type magics would be better. Yes, Cone of Cold, and... hmmm...*

Khalid, Harry and Jaheira left, heading downstairs, but Minsc, still not trusting Edwin, stayed with the two wizards. In the taproom, Harry noticed Garrick and Imoen in a corner doing shots of some kind of heavy alcohol, with Imoen drinking heavily, but looking sober in relation to the Bard. She sent him a wink, then went back to plying Garrick with drink in an age-old manner. "Chug, chug, chug!"

Okay, I don't think there's enough drink in this inn to make him forget our Blood Magics and stuff, but Imoen acted like she had a plan, so I will leave it to her. With that, Harry sat at the bar and struck up a conversation with the barkeep and the people there about the local foods and their prices into the cost of metal and leatherwork, before moving onto the mines.

The Two Harpers left and headed to the town's other tavern to do the same.

Eventually, they had a slightly better picture of what was going on. It turned out that the mines had been linked plagued by a few disappearances over the years. Nothing major, but it was an ongoing drain on their manpower at the lower levels. The citizens acted as foremen and special advisors, while slaves made up most of the mine's workforce. Most of the miners who had disappeared had been slaves, and as such, their disappearances hadn't really registered as important.

But not only had the disappearances gotten more frequent, but it began to happen at higher levels of the mine, and actual citizens started to disappear too. No longer could anyone fool themselves into thinking that it was simply people running into trouble. Something was down there. Furthermore, much of the iron they had gotten out of the mine had been tainted even before it reached the surface.

"It's as if the land around here is sick or something," pontificated one wag, a well-dressed fop of a man who looked as if he felt himself the expert on everything, with really having nothing to back it up. "Captain Brage, he was saying all along that he should ask for help from the Army and then lead a full company down there to clear out whatever was troubling the mine."

"After all, without that mine, this town is toast! Finished!" slurred another man, a much heavier drinker than the first. "It's really the only large-scale employer in the area. Forestry can only pay so much, and wha' kinda life is that fer a man anyway?"

And they couldn't use slaves for it, Harry thought angrily. From his readings of various books in Candlekeep, Harry had known that slavery was a thing in this world but knowing that and hearing about the reality were two different things.

Nonetheless, Harry rather doubted that he could do anything about slavery as a whole. And considering that Amn used convicted criminals, murderers and rapists as slaves for their mines, his desire to do anything was shrunk further.

Beyond that, Harry spent some time with an elderly widow. She kept on begging him to help find her husband, who had been lost down in the mines somewhere. Harry had promised to look into the matter, getting a minor quest for his troubles, but since it was so in keeping with the general thrust of the Iron Intake Issue, he didn't even bother reading it.

Hours after having left, Harry and the two returned to the inn to the room that Jaheira and Khalid had rented them. Khalid was looking a little drunk around the edges and was leaning heavily on a scowling Jaheira, but whatever he was saying to her seemed to be putting a bit of color into her own cheeks, something Harry found himself amused by as he held the door open for them.

Inside, they found Dynaheir had fallen asleep, along with Edwin. The two of them had eaten at least as much as Minsc of the food they'd left behind, the large warrior reported. He was sitting upright in a chair, his sword in his hand, staring between the doorway and the now sleeping Edwin.

"You get to sleep too," Harry whispered. "I'll stay up for Imoen."

"And what exactly is Imoen doing to make it so that certain information does not get shared by Garrick accidentally?" Jaheira whispered, leaning over to speak directly into Harry's ear after dumping her husband in one of the beds nearest the door.

Shivering slightly at the feel of the air on his ear, Harry looked at her in surprise, and she rolled her eyes. "Harry, the two of you have been very good about keeping... that kind of thing... secret. I really would prefer not to think of you as a simpleton who would just turn around and forget such when it happens to involve an acquaintance."

Harry sighed but nodded. "You're right. The problem is I don't know what she's doing either." At Jaheira's incredulous look, he shrugged. "She's the one who discovered our... secret, and she's always been better at it than me. Who knows what she might do? Maybe some kind of magic to make him forget?"

At that, Jaheira nodded since it made sense.

"Go on," Harry gestured towards the bed again even as he moved toward the door, intent on waiting outside in the hall. "You get some sleep. I'll wait up for Imoen."

When she appeared, Imoen didn't seem as sad or guilty about whatever she had done as Harry had expected, although Imoen was moving slowly, looking kind of weak and injured. "it's done," She reported, looking past Harry longingly at the door to their room. "But I need some healing and sleep."

"What did you do?" Harry questioned in a whisper as his hands flickered, twisting around one another for a moment before he thrust out one hand towards her, thumb extended to a 90° angle from two of his fingers outstretched, the other two held close to the palm.

At the touch of Lay On Hands, Imoen straightened up, breathing a sigh of relief and whispering a 'thank you', before going on. "I used a spell to modify his memory. It's called Obliviate. It nearly drained me entirely, minus sixty to my HP! But I was able to use the spell. Garrick won't remember anything about the advanced adventurer system, our pasts, or our spellwork, only the battles we fought together."

"Excellent!" Harry hugged her briefly before handing over a few of the healing potions he has bought from the priest. "And you don't have any regrets?"

"Nah, not after he admitted that he was already writing a song about us, the 'hidden mages'," Imoen rolled her eyes, then punched Harry in the shoulder when she noticed he still looked worried. "Don't worry about it, Harry. Garrick was an okay guy, but only okay. You're my bro, and I know that keeping that stuff a secret is going to be a big game-changer for us both in the future. Now, let's get some freaking sleep. Have I mentioned how cool it is your AAS skill means I won't have a hangover?"

Harry smiled at her, then helped her into bed before moving over to his own. Tomorrow was another day, but right now, well, even if he wouldn't remember anything afterward, sleep sounded really flipping good right about now.

End Chapter

A lot of talking more than anything else in this one, but I feel it was necessary. Not only to give most of the characters what amounted to a break but also to get to Nashkel quickly. Sorry about there not being a lemon with the Dryad guys, but it has long been my policy that I only show lemons if it noticeably helps along either the main plot or the romance plot. No side-character lemons here. Oh, and no Noober this episode either for those of you who know him. He will appear in the next chapter.