

As always, I don't own Baldur's Gate 1&2 (is that Bioware or Forgotten Realms?) or Harry Potter.

Okay guys and girls. Here we go. The first of three post today. I had hoped to give myself as much time on this and my editors as much time as I could to look over *Heroes of the High Seas* and *Butterfly Wings= A Wild Horse's Hooves* as possible. Heroes has yet to be returned to me, but Hiryo did get *Butterfly* back to me this morning. I will post Heroes on the heels of this one, but Butterfly will take me a while to go over. But it will be up tonight.

As for this fic, it hasn't been edited by anyone yet. I basically just finished it now, and thus very much didn't finish it in time to even send it out to Justlovereadin' who is normally really quick. I have however, Grammarlied the majority of the chapter. I will be sending it out to him tonight, and will replace the chapter with the edited version when he gets it back to me.

Despite that, I hope you enjoy it and remind everyone that if you read the word or PDF docs, you see a lot more of the formatting than on Patreon.

Green – party-related stuff

Orange – Quest notifications.

Blue – NPC and item notifications/observations.

Dark red – Enemy observations/bestiary notes.

Red – directly related to combat notifications

Purple – Alchemy observations and notifications

And now, without further ado, let us BEGIN...

Chapter 19: Spring Travels

The day after the expanded adventuring group celebrated Harry and the others leveling up, dawned crisp and clear, with no snow, letting the group pitch in around town as best they could, as the portion that had already been in town beforehand had been doing since the siege ended. It was immediately clear to Dynaheir Jaheira Khalid and Minsc that the townsfolk were treating them differently now. Whereas before there had been stares of disapproval or simple wariness toward the stranger in their glances, now they looked on everyone in Harry's company with smiles and welcoming nods, greeting each and every one of them as they moved around the town.

Even Viconia, of all people, got a few smiles, although she really didn't understand what to do with them. Instead, she stayed away from other people as much as she could, despite the

Color Change charm keeping her true race hidden. Alas, as a healer, she could not avoid everyone. Indeed, much to her and Vai's chagrin, with the worst of the wounded now stabilized, Kelddath essentially ordered Viconia to deal with the injured among the original town guard while he concentrated on the rest of the town's populace, bringing them out to the temple in groups of seventeen to heal per day.

This had her taking up residence in Vai's office to do it. Still, it was a better idea in the High Priest's mind than, as he confided to the drow, tempting fate by "Asking you to attempt to use your holy magic that calls upon the dark Goddess in the temple of the Morning Lord surrounded by the faithful."

To say this was not a situation either woman was comfortable with was to put it very mildly. But they learned to at least get along by the simple expedient of Vai leaving the moment Viconia showed up, and Viconia leaving the moment her daily healing spells were used up. Thankfully, the work they'd been doing in the days after the siege had meant that the healing going on now was simple to finish off what had gone before. Soon, the whole Flaming Fist garrison was back to one hundred percent.

Harry, Edwina, Alora, Dynaheir and Imoen worked with the townsfolk on various repairs. Only Alora had much objection to that, though she was better at bringing back sheep and chickens than anything else, a job that still had to be done despite the days since the battle. Jaheira initially helped out at the Temple of Lathander, but not a day after returning, Kelddath cut her loose to join her husband and Minsc as they helped the guards patrol the farmlands around the town.

They pushed east so far as to reconnect with Thalantyr, dropping off food for him for the remainder of the winter. This included a week's worth of steaks, transported in their Item Boxes, as thanks for the Enchanter's role in defending the town, and, not incidentally, saving Harry and Viconia's lives.

In the other direction, the group of ten guards and adventurers pushed into the Wood of Sharp Teeth, but that was all they did. In neither the east nor the west did they discover any signs of surviving attackers. Most had fled south, some north. In the dead of winter, with scant supplies, Jaheira was quite certain that nature would take its course in due order.

She and her husband were out again one day, five days after returning to town. Despite a heavy snowfall having come in that morning, they were leading a group of Vai's soldiers, three Flaming Fist officers, all of them armed with halberds and bows. Their armor wasn't much, simple chain mail, but they had survived the siege and were now veterans of a very hard school indeed. Today, their job was to head north to the southernmost farms, making certain the families who had moved back home were doing all right.

Soon after pushing into the area around a few of the outer farms, the intervening stone walls and larger mounds in the snow, the half-elves pushed ahead of the others, using their experience and senses to make certain nothing was untoward. But since they were on the main road, neither was looking for trouble. The last of the fleeing bandits had left the area entirely, and this zone had been patrolled well following the battle.

Even as their eyes and ears watched for anything dangerous through the snow all around them, the pair discussed Viconia and Harry's relationship. While both of them were still a little leery about any influence the drought might put on Harry, both understood it was none of their business. Further, Harry's Willpower was such that they doubted he would become any more influenced by Viconia than before, regardless of their relationship. In fact, Khalid felt the influence might go the other way.

After getting to know Viconia more in the past few months, Jaheira had actually come around to the point where she felt it was somewhat romantic: the dashing, heroic paladin finding, if not love, then affection and warmth in the arms of a priestess of Shar. The woman, in turn, found safety and friendship in the man, at the very least, enough that she was no longer following Shar's unspoken desires in whom to make friends.

Saying this, Jaheira smiled faintly at her husband, leaning across to gently touch his elbow with her hand, her words low and warm in their shared Elvish. They'd been using the language from the start to make certain nothing they said about Viconia could be shared. "In fact, it has me thinking things. I heard she and Harry are requesting the house for tomorrow night. Do you believe that you could perhaps find it in your heart, my darling, to have a night with me at the same time? I rather think there is space enough in the house for more than one couple to have some time to themselves."

Her husband blushed, which caused Jaheira no end of amusement. Lust and desire rarely lasted in any elvish, or even half-elvish relationship, but that didn't mean they were entirely without such. It was simply that elvish relationships were built more on mutual appreciation and love than human ones seemed to be, at least from the outside, with more long-lived races. Yet occasionally, Khalid and Jaheira did feel such more lively emotions.

Alas, whatever reply he was going to make was interrupted by a voice, thin with age yet still strong enough to cut through the wind and snow, announcing itself from ahead of them. "Ho there! And are you all not a wondrous sight to see in this winter wonderland of ours? When I set forth from the Friendly Arm Inn, I had no idea that I would be meeting with practically a snowstorm every day in the time it would take me to see another sight of civilization."

Both elves started, turning in that direction, chagrin flashing through them as an elderly human man walked down the road towards them. He was extremely old, but as he grew closer,

both half-elves could tell that he was also quite fit, despite his somewhat careworn clothing. His beard was long and pointed, completely white from his mouth down to the tip, where it rested below his navel, while his hair was gray, falling equally loosely past his shoulders. His hat, a wide-brimmed wizard's hat, kept the snow away from his face and neck, yet was so battered and patchwork there was no telling what color it had once been. Similarly, the man's clothing might once have been fine, but those better days were so far in its past that anyone would be hard-pressed to see them with a magnifying scope. Around the bottom of that hat's point was a thin thing of metal, on which rested a single monocle and his clothing, despite being so patched, was heavy and well-made for all of that, and in his hand was a staff much like Jaheira's own.

Jaheira's limited abilities with such things could tell that it also brimmed with magic. Its two ends were plated with metal to address more terrestrial threats, yet as she looked at the man, she could tell there was more to be wary of than just the staff. *His clothing might also be magical. I can't see a single hint of wetness from the snow there, and are those metal patches moving?*

Beside Jaheira, Khalid's eyes widened, his earlier blush at his wife's flirtations disappearing instantly, as the older half-elf held up a hand in welcome. "G, g, greetings! It is quite some t, t, time since we saw you last, Ancient O, o, One," he said in Elvish, before continuing on as if translating for the Flaming Fist guards who had moved up behind him. "But I have to w, w, wonder what brought an elderly man s, s, such as yourself out in winter at a, a, all."

"The need to see my grandson in Amn, unfortunately," the old man lied, while Jaheira wondered where her husband had met this older man before.

It was only when the elderly man came close enough for her to see a twinkle in his eyes and the hint of a small scar hidden under his beard that she recognized him, too and smiled warmly. "The darn full boy broke his legs, and his mother, my dear daughter, needs some help around the farm. What help this old wizard can give, he will, come what may. I am Terminsel, good folk, and I would like permission to stay the night in your good town."

As he finally reached them and exchanged nods with the guards, who also looked a little bemused at the man, a small ring on his finger appeared on his left hand. A second later, it was twisted around just enough to show an etched carving of a Harper's lute to the two half-elves. Not that they needed it at this point. *My word, I wonder what Harry and the others' response will be to meeting another living legend?*

Jaheira and Khalid escorted their old friend, Terminsel, back into town, where he took a moment to speak to Vai, causing the officer to blush a little at some of the compliments he paid

her. He asked dramatically where he could find a good meal, and Jaheira offered to take him home with them to try Harry's cooking. Since Harry had, over the past few days, shared some of his cooking with a few other people around town, this raised no eyebrows, and soon, the old man, Jaheira and Khalid were entering the house.

Harry and Viconia had just finished another meal of sausage pasta and a diced dried fruit salad when the married couple came in, followed by the elderly man. As they did, Harry glanced at the newcomer and froze, his eyes going so wide that the others around them noticed. Not that it mattered at all compared to what he was seeing through his Greater Observation, the boxes' outer edge was a mix of golden importance and blue observation.

Name: 'Terminsel' (N/A Errororororor)

Error! Error! This person is not only too high for your observation to tell you his level, but any information whatsoever beyond the fact that the name he is going to give you is almost certainly an assumed one rather than his real one is unable to be discerned at this time.

Your memory of a story Gorion once told you comes to you now, telling you who this old man might really be. An old legend who likes to use a simple moniker, changing up the lettering in his name to hide who he truly is.

Tread VERY lightly. Despite your new status as a Champion of Tyr, which he almost certainly can read as naturally as you could a notebook, 'Terminsel' could possibly kill you with as much effort as someone else could kill a chicken.

Licking suddenly dry lips, Harry bowed his head towards a living legend, needing to wet his throat a few times before speaking in an almost normal voice. "Well now, it's not every day that Khalid and Jaheira bring someone by, and I don't recognize you from around Beregost, old one. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

As the old man glanced in his direction, his own eyes hardened a little, and a smirk crossed his lips, almost hidden behind his beard. He straightened, his staff no longer seeming to be a mere walking staff. Rather, it seemed to Minsc that he now carried it like one who knew how to use it, and his steps into the house were sure and long, no longer shuffling. "Well now, you seem to be one who sees more than you should, Harry of Candlekeep."

The others all frowned, some of them even reaching for weapons, but Harry held up his hand as the old man went on. "I am Terminsel, and that is how you will address me. I am a Harper, and one of our strongest members, if I say it myself. I am here for the dagger... And was promised a good meal besides. The night is cold, and I will be on my way once the meal is done, regardless of what I told that most charming young woman who leads the local guard."

Realizing something was off, Edwina's eyes narrowed before she then raised a hand to her forehead, slapping it. "Really!? Does that actually work as a misnomer, or are you simply dumbing it down for the simpletons around us?"

The old man's eyes narrowed as they glanced in her direction, and Edwina quailed, almost sinking deeper into the sofa for a moment, fighting the urge to flee. There was no instinct to fight involved in that equation. The Red Wizard knew the legend of this man as well as Harry, who had read of him numerous times in Candlekeep, did. It would take someone far more powerful than Edwina to match him. Indeed, it would probably take every Red Wizard in the Sword Coast, Amn, Baldur's Gate and beyond.

The old man's eyes moved around the room, and those who looked at his elderly eyes either straightened or twitched, knowing and not exactly happy with the fact that this old man was seeing so deeply into them. "Hmm...a red wizard, a drow priestess of Shar, a true Champion of Tyr, no mere paladin. Two Harpers of decent experience, if horribly cursed to be far less than they are, plus a bonded warrior and witch pair from Rasheman. A thief, and... interesting..." he mused, his eyes locking on Imoen.

"Interesting? That can mean a lot, old man, and I'm not exactly happy with any of those interpretations," Imoen crossed her arms, putting her feet up on the table for a moment, carefully so as not to disturb any of the actual plates there, very deliberately trying to act unimpressed while wondering what Edwina, Harry and now, she saw, Dynaheir had realized about this old man.

"Oh indeed, young lady. When My Lady takes an interest in someone as she has you, I can see the faint touches of her presence still. You are almost certainly going to be cursed to live in interesting times, and that might be the least of your concerns," the old man joked, even as he moved deeper into the room, conjuring a chair for himself with a series of gestures. "Still, as she gave me no sign of wanting me to speak or guide you, I think that we'll leave it at that. Like me, My Lady prefers to watch rather than be involved beyond a certain point, lest our moves instigate still other moves from those on the other side, so to speak."

Harry wondered if those gestures were to hide the fact that it came from an Item Box, or if that was an actual, specific spell the man had come up with. Judging by how comfortable-looking and worn the chair looked, he would guess the former. The old man settled down into it, then held out his hand, showing the Harper ring before he intoned firmly, "The Soul Taker Dagger, now. Please."

The old man did not flinch as Harry pulled the dagger out of his Complex Item Box, holding it out to the man wrapped in its normal cloth bundle. The cloth was quickly removed in

the old man's surprisingly spry fingers, and 'Terminsel' took a brief second to examine it before wrapping it up again and stowing it under his cloak. "Well, that is that."

From under his cloak, he pulled out a heavy pouch of gold coins and laid it on the table. "I understand you've already been given, and mostly used, a promissory note for ten thousand gold, but this is a further three thousand for all the trouble this Dagger caused you, when you, my boy, undoubtedly attract all the trouble you need on your own. And this is for our little Order and me."

He held out his hand as he spoke, staring across the table into Harry's eyes, judging, and finding the judgment good. "You've made a friend in the Harper's Harry, and in me by removing this blade. The soul of the demon within, he should never have been on this plane of existence to begin with, and the chance to remove him entirely, that is worth fifty times the price we have paid you here."

"I rather don't think the innocents of this town would agree with you on that score, but I won't argue," Harry shook his head.

"Do not feel guilty about it. You had the Soul Taker Dagger on your person, and whoever was able to trace the Dagger here did so through magical means. They could've come after you and your party at any time in the wilderness. Instead, simply because they thought perhaps you might be able to get away that way, or simply because they wanted the slaughter, the demons after the soul within decided to attack the town," Terminsel intoned firmly. "Do not try to second-guess your decision. Demons like that will always go for the choice that will cause the greatest tragedy and death."

Harry nodded reluctant agreement, a small, childish part of him still wanting to cling to his guilt about the whole ordeal. But as soon as the handshake ended, the man clapped his hands together, grinning cheerfully. "Now, I believe I was promised a meal."

The pasta and everything else shouldn't have tasted as good as they did, which the old man commented on, complimenting Harry's cooking, and saying a line that many of the others had said more than once. "If this whole Paladin business doesn't work out for you, you can certainly make your way as a cook anywhere in the world."

Eventually, Edwina, the struck-silent Dynaheir, and the others calmed down a little, not so much getting used to the fact that they were sharing a meal with a living legend as setting it aside, as the old man obviously wanted them to. As he did so, Harry realized with a start that it was indeed a **conscious** decision on the old man's part. Terminsel/Elminster didn't strike Harry as someone who enjoyed putting on airs or having others put him on a pedestal. *Not unless he can use it to succeed at some task or other, I'd guess.*

Eventually, the conversation began flowing more naturally, with Imoen and Alora leading the way. They teased the old man about his beard and general outfit, while everyone else slowly became more comfortable in the legend's presence. In return, Elminster flirted with Imoen, though she didn't blush as much as Vai, and had Alora laughing wildly at some of his escapades as a thief.

As everyone began to feel a little full, the man looked across at Harry, his eyes again seeing far more than Harry was comfortable with. *Does he have Greater Observation, too? Or something similar, anyway?*

"Some free advice, young man. To your group and to certain individuals among them. You should not head to Baldur's Gate just yet. I didn't stay there for very long; that was not my mission, nor is it my task to clean up every ill in this world, especially those that would take time and effort even for me to dig out without too much in the way. However, there are secrets in that city, and the darkness underneath. Something is going on there, something that you are wrapped up in, I think. Or have become involved in standing against."

"We honestly didn't think of heading there once spring came, regardless. We were actually thinking of either heading to a place called Durlag's Tower, which we have a map to, or to a silver mine in the Cloakwoods, which is apparently tied into the tainted iron issue and is part of whatever the Iron Throne's overall plan is." Harry smiled over at Jaheira. "Although mine isn't the only reason why we're heading in that direction. There is some Druid business that we might want to look into there as well."

Here, Harry was speaking about the issue with the Shadow Druids, which had created the quest, Shadow Under the Eaves. It had come about when Jaheira had found a secret message left behind for other nature magic users to find, warning that the local druids had been radicalized, and that the druids might have become a threat to peace along the Sword Coast. Not as big a one as the Iron Throne and whoever was controlling that trading house's actions recently, but enough that Harry had not argued with the idea of dealing with them.

"Good. Do what you can elsewhere for a time, grow stronger, and only when you have done all you can between the border of Amn and the walls of Baldur's Gate do you enter them." The old man intoned firmly, before looking over at Edwina. "And you, Red Wizard. Despite your current guise, which is an amazing disguise, I must say, or is that a choice? A personal decision on your part?"

"You well know that it has nothing to do with personal choice! It has everything to do with a cursed item that I cannot remove from my person. If I thought for one moment that you could be trusted to do that very thing, without in some way taking advantage of me, I would ask

you for your aid,” Edwina grumbled, crossing her arms under her chest, which caused the old man’s eyes to track downward for a little second.

“Well, perhaps you need some time in that form. It might teach you what humility tastes like. Regardless, you should not venture into that city, unless of course you are willing to put away your Red Robe?”

“I cannot do so. Even hiding our loyalties like that, if it got back to my superiors...” Edwina shivered, shaking her head. “Whatever darkness or danger I dodge by hiding my affiliation would be returned threefold.”

“I know, you Red Wizards are always so arrogant in that manner. Regardless, no Red Wizard will be safe within that city. Something is hunting them, and only the most powerful of their wizards remain. One of them you might know, a man by the name of “Maligor. I made certain he did not know I was there, else he might be professionally obliged to attempt his might against mine, which would be tiresome... and destructive.”

“My former Patron’s enemy, a Zuklir, abroad? That is... worrisome,” Edwina murmured, frowning and almost looking sick for a second, the title he gave the man being that of one of the leaders of the Red Wizards. “I thank you for your warning, and I will stay well away from him. I knew that Baldur’s Gate would be deadly for me if I returned there already, but to hear both that my colors would get me hunted and that Maligor is here, that is something else entirely.”

The old man nodded and looked around at the group, giving each of them some attention and some words of advice. These ranged from small to large, with him pointedly telling Harry that, “From one with too many titles to one with too many hats for one so young, I would recommend you take the time here in Bereghost to master as many of your abilities as possible before moving on. Winter might have forced you to stay here, but it can also prove to be a time of testing for yourself.”

Alora, he simply grinned and to keep smiling. “The world is always a nicer place with jokesters and tricksters within it, so long as their tricks do not become too pointed.” Similarly, Viconia only warranted a few lines. “Your loyalty does you credit, just remember that should be a two-way street, regardless of whoever is on the other side of the street in question. Remain flexible, and remember that bigger cities are always going to be very, very dangerous for you, and you should be fine.”

As Viconia scoffed and looked away, trying hard not to show how worried or awed she was to be in a legend’s presence, Terminsel looked at Khalid and Jaheira, then sighed faintly. “Now for the pair of you. You know that I have long been looking into your particular trouble, my friends. I have not found much, only that the curse that was placed on you is an ancient one, vampiric in nature, as I’m sure you both have already determined. There might once have been

a cure for it, but if any such can be found, it will be found in the nation of Amn. Search for the ruins of ancient Sun gods, and perhaps you will eventually find a cure. I haven't, but I also haven't been able to devote as much time as I would like. Busy Busy, that's me. Despite what I want."

Of the others, Terminsel gave more profound advice to only two: Dynaheir and Imoen. For Imoen, he spoke in a language that only she, for some reason, understood, while Harry's AAS told him nothing, as if those words weren't registering to it at all.

"I don't know all of Lady Mystra's plans, Imoen of somewhere else, but I know she does not do things just out of the goodness of her heart, nor from whim. I will not pursue such, but I will warn you to remember two very old phrases. Those who shine brightly attract the strongest shadows. You're currently hidden by the light that young Harry is creating. I would use this time, as he will, to gain strength and abilities. Secondly, remember that others might be able to see Mystra's interest in you for a time. Until that fades, be very careful."

"Do all wizards practice that whole 'wiser than you' act, or is it just those with out-of-control beards?" Imoen grumbled. "I already knew that about Harry and me. The rest, ugh. Can't you tell me anything specific? We've known that this body is a Bhaalspawn. What has my full integration done to it?"

Terminsel chuckled. "Hah, it removed that aspect almost entirely. You will still have some advantages, I think, and you are stronger and far more dangerous than someone of your level should be. But there is no darkness within your being, no connection to the soul of Bhaal, which he shattered and split off into his children. Harry, on the other hand? Well, for now, his connection to Tyr and his Willpower mean that darkness isn't even close to the surface. But perhaps in the future, that might change. I hope not, but even I can't predict what will come of the Bhaalspawn and the grave curse laid on them by their very existence."

For Dynaheir, he warned her not to be too locked into her own visions of the future, a sad, almost wistful expression on his face. "I've been the subject of prophecy a time or two, and I've attempted to scry the future myself numerous times. It never works out as you think it will, and if it does, well, sometimes it shouldn't have. Other times, you're the one who forced it, thinking you know best."

"The alternative is worse, old one," Dynaheir insisted. "That is why we Witches of Rasheman always see two images when we go on a quest. One without our intervention and another not."

Terminsel snorted, that guise sitting thin for a moment. "And that is supposed to show you all the factors involved? Still, if you think you know best, what is this old man supposed to tell you that you do not already know?"

Dynaheir had the grace to wince at that. "I, I will take it under advisement, Elder."

Terminsel turned to the last member of the party to be addressed personally and cheerfully held out a hand. "Might I see the mighty Boo?"

Whether or not he was doing this as a joke or not, Harry's Greater Observation could not tell him, but the old man took Boo from Minsc and seemed to speak to him for a while. He nodded at Boo's squeaks for a time, while Dynaheir and Edwina looked on, both wizards showing the same emotions in a way that would probably have horrified either one of them: shock and disbelief.

Whether simply for fun or a sign of something more, the brief discussion with the Miniature Giant Space Hamster ended, and he chuckled. "Well, my friends both big and small, I think that your alliance serves both of you very well indeed. Keep him close, my big friend, and perhaps in the future, your adventures will be such as to awe all of Rasheman."

"Oh, that it were so! To return with all the tales of my adventures with Boo, with protecting Fair Dynaheir, I would be delighted for this!" Minsc enthused.

With that, Terminsel tugged at his long beard as he went through his memory of what he had seen in Baldur's Gate. "More generally, for your entire party, Harry of Candlekeep, I would also tell you to stock up on potions that allow you to see through the illusions, or spells that will allow you to see the reality of individuals. Many in Baldur's Gate are not what they seem."

"Like a certainly elderly gentleman sitting across from me?" Harry quipped, although his eyes were narrowed in thought.

"Not quite. My illusion is based on clothing, attitude and keeping my strength hidden; theirs is based on something else." The old man shook his head. "I only caught a glimpse as quick as I was to push through the city, but that glimpse was enough. You will face doppelgängers in the city. I saw at least three, and there were almost certainly more. Beyond that, and the name of your enemy, I cannot give you any direct particulars. The harpers in Baldur's Gate have been silenced, and with them, my own forms of information gathering are not up to speed, unfortunately, else I'd have at least liked to be able to give you enough information to be certain the Iron Throne is the centermost source of all this trouble."

Both Jaheira and Khalid stiffened, while Harry slowly nodded. "Even that information is important. Thank you."

The old man nodded, then stood up briskly. "Now, I must go. I am wanted in the south, well past Amn, and I have thousands of leagues to go." But the old man shook his head. "And before you ask, my young Red Wizard," he said, speak spitting out the last two with a grim little

smile on his face. "You should know that the journey is almost as important as the destination. And how you arrive can be even more so."

Leaving them to ponder that, the ancient wizard bowed his head to one and all and then excused himself out the door. Not ten minutes later, he was walking out of the town, despite the ongoing snowstorm. Fifteen after that, he had left the last of the still-standing farmsteads well behind him.

He was not just in a rush to head further south, though.

The stars aligned properly as he stared up at them, and Elminster the Sage smiled grimly, pulling out the dagger and staring at it. Ignoring the whispers in his mind, the desires of the soul within, Elminster held the dagger up, his other hand glowing, a glow that increased as bright particles of light began to descend from the sky and all around him. A second later, he smashed that hand down on the side of the dagger, and something within screamed as the light in his hand flashed into the metal, where darkness rose to meet it, only to fade as the scream of rage and fury changed timber to show fear. As the light from Elminster's glowing palm fully infused the blade, both the darkness and its shrieks faded away, leaving nothing but a memory behind. It was that easy, the soul within so weakened by its captivity that it could not fight as the ultimate end came for it.

As the final scream faded away and the world began to settle down, the old man held the dagger up, staring at its shattered, cracked face thoughtfully in the candlelight, then watching as those cracks spread. It soon shattered, as if bits and pieces of it were turning into sand, a process that quickly spread until the sand of the dagger blade began to drip between his fingers.

For a time, Elminster stared down at the remains for a few moments, then he turned further south, chuckling quietly as he went. "The soul of a child of destiny mixed with the blood of the divine of Faerun, whose destiny is always up in the air. Truly, we do live in fascinating times. Although perhaps none more so than that young man and those close to him," the ancient wizard laughed, as he went on his way.

OOOOOOO

The youngish group of adventurers was still feeling some awe and no small amount of concern that they had garnered the attention of someone like Elminster the next day, particularly Viconia and Edwina. Both had hundreds of reasons why being in the same place as someone like Elminster, *nom de guerre*, had been an incredibly nervous thing. The others were more awed and stunned to have been in his presence, thoughtful about the advice he had shared with them out of the blue.

Well, all save Khalid and Jaheira, as they had been in his presence before. While the pair hadn't actually traveled with Elminster as Gorion had, they had worked with him closely a few times on Harper business.

Seeing how introspective and quiet the rest of his group was, even Imoen and Alora, Harry rapped the breakfast table with his Spoon of Authority. Really, it was a ladle that he'd just used to dole out a succulent rosemary and chicken stew for breakfast, but it might have well been a holy item for all the respect it garnered from everyone but Viconia, who served as his sous chef.

"Okay, I know we're all thinking about last night, and I know why. Meeting legends like that out of the blue is always a surprise, but we've already done that once before in the form of Drizzt once before. Let's move past it and take advantage of both the fact that he seems to have taken the snowstorm with him when he moved on, and the fact that we don't have to worry about running into super-powerful demons any longer."

That was something Elminster had been certain about: the demon, Hephernaan was not involved in the issues around the Sword Coast. He had been here solely for the Soul Taker Dagger. Purely human mortal schemes didn't interest Hephernaan at all, and he was far too powerful to be forced to help against his will.

"For now," Jaheira warned. "Yet, we did foil them here, Harry. That means that eventually, even if they don't wish to deal with whoever is behind the Iron Throne, beings such as Hephernaan may eventually come after us. After all, you are a paladin, sorry, a champion of Tyr, and thus a target for them just as demons are a target for you."

Harry stared at her, then slowly shook his head. "Why do you have to rain on my parade, Jaheira?"

For some reason, that line seemed to set Jaheira and Khalid off, if in very different fashions. Khalid began to laugh, the sound stuttering as it always did, thanks to his magically caused speech impediment. Whereas Jaheira's lips began to twitch, her eyes glinted just a little bit.

The overall effect was to soften her normally austere, stern expression into something truly attractive, Harry reflected, even as he continued. "I'm almost tempted to not cook for you any longer with comments like that."

At that, Jaheira's good humor vanished, and indeed, she looked a little panicky, while Khalid continued to laugh at her expense to one side. Then her face firmed, and she crossed her arms, and the blonde half-elf glared belligerently at Harry, reminding Harry of Imoen for a

moment most strongly, despite her enhanced age. "I, I will not let you silence my genuine concerns and worries through the use of threats of that nature, oh, illustrious champion."

"Come on, Harry, you know you don't mean that. That's like using a fireball on a person who just bumped you in the square," Imoen said, shaking her own annoyance at the simple lack of help Elminster had been for her despite Mystra and her direct involvement in Imoen's soul-structure, continuing on. "You should have just warned her that next time we clean up after a battle or something, you'll make her do her share rather than do it all yourself with your Gathering Skill."

Jaheira and Harry both blinked, their standoff breaking, then actually nodded as one. "You know, given how disturbing and annoying such aspects of adventuring can be, that would in fact do quite well for a punishment for an adventuring party that has gotten used to Harry's abilities." She then glared over at Harry once more, shaking her head. "However, my point stands."

"To speak about that more seriously, about such, I believe this party could have dealt with the demon, the Tanar'ri, if we were able to set the battlefield, to use my blood wizard spells and/or tactics as a whole unit. We were merely caught out of position, and through no fault of our own, even if I personally would love to find fault with your decisions to split our party like that. One should never split the party, a bit of truism that obviously has some truth behind it, indeed." Dynaheir said, gazing at Harry almost reverently, a look that had come into Dynaheir's eyes several times since she, Minsc, Khalid and Jaheira had arrived in Beregost and she had learned that Harry had become a paladin of Tyr. "However, the other one, the one that came from the north, the Baatezu? That one would probably have been beyond us, even if we could do all that appropriately."

"We'd make him work for it, but yeah, that guy worried me a lot more than Tanar'ri when Kelddath explained the fight against Hephernaan." Harry's hands clenched around the spoon to the point where the wood of it began to groan. He then blinked as a small hand touched his elbow, breaking out of his bad mood to smile at Alora, the halfling looking back at him with a smile on her face and an empty soup bowl.

"But there is nothing we can really do about it," he went on more calmly, using his ladle to give Alora more. "We had already decided to grind out what stats we could here in Beregost, and I think we need to continue with that plan. Including Wisdom for those of us who need it."

He smirked over at Minsc, who gave him a thumbs-up. "Do not worry, friend Harry! Even if the lake remains frozen, there are ways to fish in winter. This one will show you, and is actually interested to see if there are ways you can use your Gathering ability with it."

“What, you mean gather all the fish of a single type once we fish it out?” Harry asked, confused.

At that, Minsc looked horrified. “Absolutely not! That would take all of the fun out of it and might well damage the lake itself if you remove a certain type of fish entirely from its local environment.”

Harry and Imoen substituted the word environment for ecosystem there. As he did, Harry reflected that that was kind of a stark reminder that, for all of his madcap berserker-like nature, Minsc was a Ranger who had just as much of a connection to nature, if in a very different manner, as Jaheira, who was nodding along with his words.

“No, Minsc was talking about the idea of how your ability can be used in various different ways, skinning, taking the meat off the bones and so forth, including putting up our ice fishing hut. Simply sitting by the side of the lake isn’t going to do in winter, after all.”

“Eh, fine, I’ll come out and help you build your hut if you think you need the help.” Harry looked over at Jaheira and Khalid. Being the ones who had traveled the Sword Coast before, they were probably the only ones who knew the answer to this one. “With Elminster advising us to stay here until winter breaks, how much longer do you think it’ll be before it does and foot traffic and such start up again? I know that the caravans aren’t expecting to leave for another two months, but I’ve also heard that would push their departure date into summer.”

“There’s a reason for that, Harry, which I can summarize in one word,” Jaheira replied tartly. “Mud. Springtime on the Sword Coast is a **very** wet time, as snow turns to rain, and the snow on the ground turns to still more water. You have never known irritation and annoyance until you are part of a caravan that has to stop every few minutes to pull a cart out of a small ditch that has been turned to mud or push a recalcitrant donkey or mule along because it refuses to try and pull a cart that has gotten stuck in such a substance.”

“Still...” She shook her head, glancing over at her husband, who made a waffling gesture with one hand. “Two or three weeks, perhaps before winter breaks? With all the equipment we’ve gathered for the cold weather, we’ll be able to handle the rain and the continuing cold. The mud will be the only issue. It won’t be pleasant, but we’ll at least be able to move on.”

“If travel were always easy, you wouldn’t have to be an adventurer to do a lot of it,” Harry answered philosophically, shrugging. “Still, that’s a good general goal to shoot for. But I was serious. Those of us who want to upgrade our Wisdom should look into that, along with the various Strength and other stats.”

He looked around at them all. “Also, since we no longer have to work with the local guards for most of our time here in Beregost, I’d like everyone to look for other means of

making money or upgrading our stats in various ways. I'm going to be heading over to the Thunderhammer Smithy after breakfast as well, but since we already know everything he sells, I don't think everyone needs to come with me."

Beyond Harry's own Tower Shield +1, which he had gotten all the way back at the Friendly Arm Inn, being destroyed by the Tanar'ri, Viconia had lost her own Small Shield +1 against the same beast. Even Imoen's own Short Sword+1, and been warped and torn apart, such that some of the pieces couldn't be found by the Repair spell.

"Bah, do not count me in for such activities," Viconia muttered, looking down at her blue skin for a moment. "I think I'd like to go for a full day without needing to use your Color Change Charm, Harry, so I will be staying here for the day. I am but one point away from hitting the limit my Strength stat can be boosted, and I can do those exercises right here."

No one else had any objections to that, or Jaheira and Khalid when they said they would prefer to keep working with the guards in patrolling the area around the town, and attention turned back to the breakfast soup that Harry had created. While not a normal breakfast type of meal, it was still profoundly tasty, and everyone gave it the normal two thumbs up for any meal made by Harry.

A few hours later, Harry walked into the Thunderhammer Smithy. It still wasn't back to normal operations entirely after the assault on the town, being devoted entirely to parts and materials needed for the ongoing repairs. There were a lot of people coming and going, carrying more nails, small hinges, clamps, and so forth out than the smithy would normally be making, but Taerom was still there.

He wasn't working on anything himself. Such simple work certainly did not need a Master Smith. Rather, he was overseeing all of his apprentices, even while manning the desk, like he normally would very much not be.

"-- Isaac, and I will give you a thrashing," Taerom said as they entered. Just because Gandar was making eyes at your girl last night is no reason to try to drop a white-hot nail onto his foot. That'll be the second time I've seen you do something like that, and senior apprentice or no, you'll not learn a single thing more from me with that kind of attitude. Fortil, your fire's about two gusts away from going out of control with all the effort you're putting into that bellows. You don't need the iron that hot, boy, and no, it doesn't matter if that bit of pug iron might still be tainted with whatever was infecting the mines down in Nashkel. Those hinges yer working on don't need to last that long, just a few months, then they can be replaced by more permanent ones."

Having proven that, like most teachers everywhere, Taerom had developed eyes in the back of his head, the smith crossed his arms and mock-glared at Harry, although there was a

twinkle in his eyes as he did. "Ho there, Harry. I don't suppose you're here to actually give me some interesting work for the day, are you?"

"Afraid not, Taerom," Harry said, shaking his head, "We're actually here to just buy and sell."

Harry had already sold the various items like bandit scalps and so forth to Vai several days ago, before the last round of snowstorms had hit the town. However, he still had all of the spears, pikes, short swords and so forth that he had gathered from the battlefields around Beregost to sell off. And his gathering ability had even separated the weapons that had been made with tainted iron from the rest, an amazing trick.

He explained what he had to sell to Taerom, who scowled. "You know, I've no way of knowing how much of that is from enemies that your group killed, and those that were killed by the guards, but which couldn't be policed up by the townsfolk. Even if you've been able to figure out which items were tainted and which weren't, that's a bigger deal, especially considering that you were also fighting in defense of the town. Which means that all the resources from the fight should go to the town itself."

As Harry frowned in mock-outrage, Taerom continued, his own face becoming livelier. "I'll give you half the normal price for the heads of the pikes and the blades. The wood's no use for me, and nor is their armor save as iron. Hobgoblin gear and the rest aren't up to my standards, either, so don't bother trying to sell me their armor."

Taerom actually spat to one side, a bit of theater that Dynaheir, no mean barterer herself, had to nod at. "Which isn't even saying how the boys and I will need to examine every item you give us. That'll be taking us away from work the townsfolk need."

This little speech had activated Harry's Barter skill, and he grinned. "Ha, you think I only brought in bandit or hobgoblin armor? Shows what you know, ogred, minotaurs and even Alu-fiends had their own armor, all of which my band's gathered up. Here, let me show you..."

As the two men began to haggle, Imoen and Alora looked over the wares on offer with Minsc and Dynaheir. Edwina had decided to refill the group's wine supplies rather than come with them. Considering he and Khalid were the only real heavy drinkers among them, at least for wine, Minsc was more of a beer fellow, whereas Harry and Jaheira were almost ascetic in how little they drink.

For the next half-turn of the glass, Harry and Taerom went back and forth on the various prices for each bit of iron in turn. Harry knew he couldn't sell them as completed pieces, not even the ones that weren't made with tainted iron. Right now, they were simply resources, steel and iron alike. This was followed by several hours more as Taerom and two of his apprentices

went over each weapon and piece of armor as Harry brought them out of his Complex Item box in clumps of fifty.

His warning of which weapons had been made with tainted iron won Harry some nods, and in the end, he was happy enough to exchange all that he was offering for as many Arrows of Ice, Arrows +2, slingstones +1 that Taerom he had on hand still. Since most of those had been turned back into the smithy after the battle, the party soon had sixty Arrows of Ice, a hundred and ten Arrows +2, and two hundred Slingstones +1 to go around their sling users. Harry was also able to have Taerom toss in a small and medium shield, and then buy a Large Shield +1. It was worth more than the rest combined, but Harry was happy with his bartering, as he had gotten the best prices for everything but the Arrows +2 he could get.

As Harry was finishing placing the new items in his Complex Item Box and wondering how to broach the subject of the reward he was due from Taerom specifically for having cleared his Blood in the Snow Quest, Taerom spoke up once more, his more expressive bargaining face shifting into a more normal, if serious mien for the man. "I have to thank you and yours. Without them, without what you had done, specifically your challenging the demon, Thanatyr would not have arrived in time. Dozens more would've died, and my smithy would've been destroyed by that particular monster, and me with it. Though I doubt you even noticed I was there when you were fighting it."

Harry hadn't, but thought it impolite to point that out. Moreover, he still felt guilty about the whole thing, knowing that it had been the Soul Taker Dagger that had brought that particular danger down on the town. But he pushed that aside, knowing that it was truly the fault of the demons more than anything he'd personally done, something everyone had been telling him since. *Maybe eventually I'll even believe it too.*

"As such, I find myself deep in your debt, and I wish to clear it immediately," Taerom continued, unaware of Harry's moment of inner turmoil. "You may have one item from my smithy for free. I'd recommend one of these two..."

Taerom gestured to the special, magically locked and protected case set aside on the normal desk used for business in the smithy. "They aren't my personal work, but they are better than anything I've made in years, bar those Ankheg Chest Plates of yours."

Harry didn't really need to look at the two items on hand again, as he'd thought long and hard on this choice. But he still did so as the others all looked at the items of interest. Along with Jaheira and Imoen working together to keep Alora, the little magpie, away from the new shinnies.

[Light Crossbow of Speed: 'The Army Scythe'.](#)

The Army Scythe. A short-lived outpost of civilization in the Frozen Forest far to the south unearthed this weapon, and many other magical weapons, from the ruins of an ancient nation that dwelled in that cold land. The colonists used these ancient weapons to try to defend their territory, but as many other nations could have told them, being that far north was not a good idea. They were crushed by a superior number of hobgoblins, joining the previous ancients in death. Well, barring a few who escaped, carrying weapons like this one to the south.

Also called the Light Crossbow of Speed, the Army Scythe looks like a light crossbow +1. However, unlike most such weapons, this weapon's attack is not magically enhanced. Rather, it is **faster** than any other light crossbow variant. Users can fire two or even three times faster than a normal light crossbow wielder.

Crossbow proficiency can also enhance the wielder's speed further.

Durability: 100/100

Weight: 5 pounds.

Range: 100 feet

The other one was a dagger, or rather, a Poison Dagger +2.

Dagger of Venom +2.

While most Daggers +2 are simply magically enhanced stabbing daggers and thus favored by assassins, thieves and other dealers of Backstabs the world over, this particular dagger has been enchanted to do further poison damage to its target by the Shadow Thieves of Amn. Every time the user successfully hits an opponent, it secretes venom into the enemy. This venom works quickly, reducing the target's health by 2 points every second unless the target is immune to poisoning.

Note: the venom can only work if the dagger strikes skin. Certain animals, particularly reptiles, are also often immune to poisons.

Harry cut off reading the description there, as even though the dagger would be an amazing weapon in a normal thief's hands and he knew that Alora in particular was interested in the dagger, Harry had talked Imoen into putting a point in crossbow skill for this very purpose when they had leveled up about a week ago for this purpose.

Besides, while Alora likes the dagger, it's more because she likes the idea of using it than she could actually do so well. She doesn't have a proficiency point in dagger. We've already armed her with a Short Sword +1, which she told was always her close combat preference. No, I'd only buy it, which we could, admittedly, if it was a throwing dagger or if you didn't have to hit skin with it.

"We'll take the Army Scythe, and thank you for it, Taerom," Harry said, while Imoen nodded slowly, and Alora looked a little sad.

Taerom nodded brusquely, then opened the case and, with the same air of someone lifting a child, reached inside and pulled out the Army Scythe, holding it out to Harry with that same reverence, but Harry stepped back and gestured Imoen to take it. She did so, and thanks to the point in crossbow proficiency, knew how to hold it against her shoulder, cock the lever, and settle in a crossbow bolt. "Done and done then. As witnessed by Gond, there is no more debt between us, Harry of Candlekeep, and any business forthwith will not make any mention nor note of it."

Harry nodded, wondering if that formality was something from the blacksmith's culture, or something to do with his religion, considering he'd just named but not caring so much about it either. With that in mind, he repeated the words, feeling a stirring of some kind within him, a contract made as he held out his hand. "Done and done then, fair and equally adjudged. And may your hands continue to make such wonders in the future."

Taerom reached over, and the two of them clasped forearms, before Harry's lips quirked. "Although, for now, I don't suppose you have an area out back cleared enough for us to try this crossbow out, do you?"

"Who do I look like, an amateur? Take it out there and be quick about it. I gave you twenty crossbow bolts along with with the Army Scythe, but if you want to buy more, you'll be buying them at my full price," Taerom said brusquely, his eyes glinting in a way that told Harry both they would be paying that price, and that it was his last little dig at Harry for having bargained so well with him not once, but several times now.

"Minsc, break out your bow. You too, Alora. Let's see how the Army Scythe does in comparison," Harry ordered, clapping the big man on the shoulder while nodding at the two thieves who were examining the Scythe excitedly.

Minsc nodded agreeably to that, while Dynaheir stayed behind, engaging Taerom in a question about where some of the enchantments on his more magical items had been done, remarking, that, "--Thalantyr does not seem the type of mage to do such as part of an ongoing arrangement to me, if only because doing so would bring him into close contact with another person more than he is liable to enjoy—" at which point Harry and the others had exited out the back of the smithy.

The back area of the smithy faced outward towards the outer farms and beyond, and had been the sight of some of the fighting around the town, much like everything else there. Imoen had personally seen people holding both the outer stone wall, which only came up to her chest, and then retreating back into the smithy, barricading the door as archers stationed on the

roof covered them, which she remarked on now. "That was nasty work, but the guards did darn well."

"An organized force is always going to have an advantage over a disorganized one, especially in a defensive battle," Harry agreed, humming thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing. *Walls... walls and ditches... hmmm...* "Imoen, what kind of blood magic spells would you use to create a berm?"

"A wh, oh, a wall?" Imoen's lips twisted in a moue; she frowned. "Depends on what there is to work with. I think a Bombarda to create a foxhole, but maybe a transfiguration spell on the ground? Hmm... I'd have to think about that one."

"Do it," Harry nearly ordered, before shaking his head, taking in the backyard again. "For now, line girls, and let's see what happens."

Taerom had already cleared significant portions of the yard of snow before the latest round of snowstorms. That snow was piled high enough to make a fifteen-foot-tall outer wall almost now, yet most of the backyard area was cleared, allowing Minsc, Alora and Imoen to set up across from a series of targets at the far end.

Against the backdrop of ringing hammers and the hissing of steam coming from the open doorway into the smithy, the trio did so. Without any prompting from him, the three began firing, and almost instantly, Harry could tell the differences between their shots.

Thanks to their class, the two thieves could only put one proficiency in any weapon style. Harry had known for a long time that the proficiency points made a real difference, but this exercise made it even more obvious. Their shots hadn't been horrible, but they had been off-center, while Minsc's arrow drilled into the center of the target with barely any time spent aiming. He then had another arrow on his string within a few seconds, far faster than Alora could move.

While Harry could put down the fact that his arrow had gone straight through the target and into the snow behind it to its quarrels to Minsc's pure strength, the speed was something else entirely. Which was very much the case with Imoen, because even before Minsc had shifted to pull out another arrow from his quiver, Imoen had loaded and fired her crossbow for a second time, which should have been impossible even for a light crossbow. She had shifted targets to the one Alora had been firing at and finished off that one even as Minsc's second arrow was in the air.

"Holy heck! Okay," Imoen said, staring down at the weapon, shaking her head. "That, that was a lot different than using my Short Sword +1. That weapon, it just strikes harder, cuts deeper. It doesn't help my speed at all. This one... wow!"

“Speed is indeed the goal to any weapon’s use, especially those for long range,” Minsc said, sounding far more serious than normal as he rested the bottom of his bow on the ground for a moment. “However, it is the final goal. My bow teacher, he always said to work on accuracy and the rightness of your movement before working on your actual speed. You’ve got to be good to be fast. If that weapon allows you to be fast without becoming good, a part of Minsc thinks it is a cheating thing, and it makes his nose wrinkle as if Old Darb had once more brought his leatherwork home with him in the village back in Rasheman.”

Dynaheir’s words announced her presence from behind Harry, and he turned to look at her, nodding along with her words. “Speed is indeed one of the most dangerous aspects out there. It is why Elven warriors or even half-elven warriors like Khalid can become so dangerous over time. The dexterity that they gain from their very race makes them far faster and far more accurate than most humans can learn to become in the same timeframe. It is also why such items like Boots of Haste and so forth are so sought-after among adventurers. I had thought the poisoned dagger a more worthwhile purchase, Harry, but seeing that display, it makes sense.”

“We actually have enough gold on hand to buy the dagger, but honestly, I don’t think it fits well enough with our styles to make all that much sense. Alora and Imoen don’t have proficiency points in Dagger, and I certainly am not going to ask you to get in close with an enemy. If you have to defend yourself, both Minsc have failed,” Harry said, causing the big ranger to nod seriously.

“Instead of spending somewhere between six to ten thousand gold on a weapon we might not need, I’d like to keep that money for the future. If I thought we could go back and buy more from Thalantryr and not have the crotchety ass sic his adamantine golem on us, I’d do that, but as it is, that’s not happening.”

The others all nodded as that made sense. The last Imoen, Alora and Harry had seen of Thalantryr was his back as he headed back to the High Hedge, and the guards under Jaheira and Khali who had brought out food for him had been turned away at the door.

Smiling faintly as Imoen sent another few bolts downrange, Harry nodded. “I think this’ll work. Imoen, transfer the Shadow Armor over to Alora now before we forget.”

At that, Imoen sighed sadly. The Shadow Armor had gotten her through everything in the siege except the Tanar’ri demon, and she had really enjoyed being entirely immune to nearly every weapon used by their enemies. She had been able to repair the damage done to it by the demon too, so it was essentially as good as new now.

But she agreed that it was a good allocation of their resources. With her on long-range duty, she could use her spells and the Army Scythe with equal efficiency, while Alora, if there

was a specific target to assassinate, would do a much better job of surviving such a mission if she was spotted, and then getting away after her Backstab, if she had the Shadow Armor.

Within seconds, Imoen and Alora swapped armor. Imoen now wore the padded leather armor that normal thieves used, which was somewhere between a gambeson and a brigandine with far fewer metal plates hidden beneath. As they watched, the magic of the Shadow Armor shifted it to match Alora's size, soon making it fit as well on the halfling as it had on Imoen.

The halfling grinned cheerily, pulling the hood up and over her head for a second, before disappearing into Hide-in-Shadows. She reappeared as her hand slapped Harry's rear first second, causing Dynaheir to squawk in outrage and Harry to stumble in surprise, not having anticipated that.

"Thanks, Harry. This is really neat! I don't like the idea of getting hit at all regardless of what I'm wearing, but at least if I do, this thing'll let me survive whatever it is. Well, so long as it doesn't trample me in place I suppose, but that's always a worry for us halfling folk amongst you tall creatures. Seriously, why do you all grow so tall? What is wrong with being three feet five, I ask you? We halflings, gnomes and dwarves get along very well, after all."

Rolling his eyes good-naturedly at Alora's rambling, Harry gestured the group back into and through the smithy, exchanging a nod of farewell with Taerom. He had worried that Alora would still push to buy the dagger, but she didn't. Instead, Alora seemed to really like the Shadow Armor, touching it occasionally, and smiling happily to herself as her ramblings trailed on.

Minsc even laughed and joined in, starting with the one about why humans were so tall, which, in his opinion, was to "Allow those of us with goodness in our hearts and righteousness in our arms to better battle the forces of evil and give them the butt kicking they deserve at eye height. Even if most of us do not need to go for the eyes like mighty Boo does, it always pays to look your enemies in the eyes, the better to intimidate them back to goodness."

"In that case, haven't you rather overdone it, my large friend?" Dyanheir quipped, causing Minsc to guffaw.

On the way back to their temporary domicile, the group paused as a voice shouted from one side of the cleared pathways through the snow that constituted the only roads through the town at present. "Ho there, big man!"

Most of the common grounds and open areas within the town had yet to be cleared entirely of snow, of course, but people still needed to come and go from the various dwellings. These causeways were, along with all the other work going on to repair the town, continually

dug out by those too clumsy, weak or young to be given more important work, although they no longer resembled the tunnels through the snow as they once had earlier in the winter.

“Big man! I’d like to have a word with you if I may,” the civilian approaching them shouted, his breath coming out in a fog like the adventurers.

Turning to look at the man directly, Harry’s Greater Observation skill activated.

Laramy Wisham.

Class: Civilian specialist: bar owner.

While Laramy might make up for his lack of chin with a lack of willpower, he is the owner and proprietor of the Jovial Juggler, the inn where you met the rather underwhelming young paladin, Bjornin. Despite the above-mentioned lack of willpower, Laramy has made the Jovial Juggler the go-to place for young locals of both genders.

This might be why he is currently looking quite harried, far more so than he should be after so much time has passed since the siege, and is sporting what looks like a black eye, if expertly hidden under makeup.

Where he got such expertise is perhaps best left unanswered.

Minsc also recognized the man, although of course he didn’t get all of the insight that Harry’s Greater Observation skill gave him. “Friend Tavernkeeper, are you well? I do remember that brief fracas a few days ago left a mark on your face, as it did on your bar, before Minsc could step in and deal with the young delinquents by dousing their heads in the snow. A tried and true method to deal with such, I can tell you, from personal experience.”

“That’s actually why I wanted to talk to you. My normal bouncer quit; he’s decided to become a caravan guard and wants to spend the rest of winter training. And as you saw, my tavern’s already paying for the lack. I need someone to help keep the young rowdies in line for the rest of the winter. Would you be up to it? I’d be willing to pay, say, a quarter gold a night?”

That activated Harry’s Barter skill, fighting back a blink as a quest-related message box popped up in front of him.

Small quest, Minor, Being Big and Boisterous has been offered to your party member, Minsc.

Note: Occasionally party members can be offered quests entirely on their own without your input, much like they can create quests, as Khalid did for you and Viconia did for herself with the **Get Gud Scrub** quest. However, you will still be able to see the full details of the quest, as will the individual thus approached. These quests can vary wildly in size, complexity and depth.

This one seems relatively easy, even if it will take a while to complete, hence its designation.

Laramy Wisham wishes to hire Minsc as a temporary bouncer at the Jovial Juggler for the rest of the winter. He will deal with rowdy youngsters and do the occasional heavy lifting around the bar.

This quest's reward can vary wildly depending on if you wish to barter about it, from a mere quarter gold piece to ??? a random reward that you cannot guess at right now.

Seeing all that, Harry opened with, "My friend is an adventurer, sir, not a lowly bouncer. Surely you don't need him for such services, and if you do, you need to pay him more than a quarter gold! You're paying him for his time, after all, not just the task at hand, and this will take away from Minsc's precious time training or otherwise doing things that could better the party in a much larger way."

Thanks to his Barter skill, Harry was able to quickly work the man up to two gold a day, at which point Laramy began to waver. Soon something else was put on the table, the man's eyes gleaming with the avarice of someone who thought he was going to get one over on someone else.

"I can't go more than two gold a day, but if you think your friend's time is more expensive than that, and if he's willing to work around the tavern when I need them, I... could, if you're going to twist my arm about it, throw in these," Laramy said, rummaging in his pocket for a moment. "I don't know what they are, but they were handed over to cover a very steep tab. The man who gave them to me convinced me they were worth more than fifty gold. What they are really worth I can't say; I haven't been willing to put a hundred gold down to get High Priest Ormylr to identify them for me, but maybe you lot can do it on your own. That's my final offer."

The man held out what looked like two dice. They were larger than most, and looked fuzzy for some reason, and looking at them Imoen and Alora had to bite back laughter. Alora thought they looked like a child's toy, while Imoen thought they looked like something she had seen in an American action movie hanging from a car's rear-view mirror. They were just so out of place on Laramy's hand she couldn't help but laugh.

Dynaheir also stared at them in some consternation, but Harry's Greater Observation skills told him something. These were extremely magical, and might have something to do with luck, although what that could be, Harry couldn't tell without touching them. He could tell they weren't cursed, at least, which meant that the magic in them was almost certainly benign in nature.

Once more thanks to his Barter skill, Harry knew that if he demanded the chance to identify them first, the deal would be off the table and he'd probably have to buy them. The idea was there in the back of his mind, but the unknown was enticing enough for him to make

the deal. "I believe that will do nicely. Minsc, if you want to work with this man, you can. I'm not going to force you, though."

"Minsc thinks it would be most amusing to toss youngsters out on their rears when they make trouble. It will be a funny reversal of his own youth, when Minsc was the one who was more often than not tossed out for drinking things he shouldn't, or challenging the more senior members of the Warrior Lodge to headbutting contests," the large ranger announced in his normal bombastic tone.

Internally remarking that that last bit made far too much sense in his mind, Harry nodded, and Minsc held out his hand to the man. Right before they shook on it though, Harry said, "And payment upfront, I believe."

That wasn't something Harry would've been able to get away with before he had finished the An Oath Fulfilled Quest, but with his Renown and standing with the people of Beregost, along with a certain level of intimidation coming from the fact that his party were adventurers and this man was a simple civilian, it worked. Given Harry's reputation, Laramy knew that Minsc would follow through regardless of being paid before the job even began, and also knew that if Laramy pushed things, Harry was more than likely to simply disagree and cut the deal entirely. He handed over the dice, and Harry became instantly glad that he had made the deal.

Fuzzy Wuzzy Lucky Dice.

You have no idea where these dice came from, or why they are, in fact, fuzzy, to the point they feel soft to the touch despite clinking in your hands as if they are made of typical bone or wood like most dice. However, that really doesn't matter in the great scheme of things. What does is that they give an automatic bonus of +3 to Luck once on your person.

Note: "On your person" does not mean "in an Item Box." A regular pouch on your belt, however, is perfectly acceptable.

Further, you can tell there might be more to these dice than meets the eye. As you run your fingers over them, it's clear that the small holes on some sides are deeper and have a series of ridges to them. What this could mean you don't know, but it is something to keep in mind.

These things should have been worth at least two thousand gold, easily. Something to keep in mind.

Setting aside the mystery of the things, that was actually a pretty darn good and very nice constant upgrade to a Stat that no one had any idea how to increase naturally. Despite his better nature, Harry was almost tempted to confiscate them. However, he knew that Minsc, like

practically everyone else in the party, could use an upgrade to their luck, and Harry already had his Potter luck working both positively and negatively against him.

Thinking about it, he began to honestly wonder whether, on top of helping, such things could also hinder at the worst possible time. Better to give it to someone who wouldn't need to deal with the negative aspect of that 'skill,' he reflected.

Harry handed them over to Minsc with a nod of approval. The deal was made, even as Minsc held up the dice to Boo, who sniffed them, then began to play around with them in Minsc's massive hand. To Boo, they appeared almost like giant building blocks or pillow-sized chew toys.

With the deal made, Laramy asked Minsc to come with him now, saying he needed some heavy-duty lifting done for the moment, a gleam of triumph in his eyes that told Harry he had no idea what these dice were really worth. Although reluctant to leave his Witch, Harry waved Minsc to follow the man, saying Dynaheir would stay with Harry and the others for the rest of the day, which was enough for the Ranger from Rasheman.

The others continued on their way back to the house, with Alora and Imoen talking about how they wanted to spend at least half the time remaining in town working on various traps. While working on traps like that wouldn't increase their chances of successfully creating such traps, it was already high enough for both of them that they weren't concerned about it. Rather, they wanted to create larger, more effective traps, with more dangerous effects and so on.

It was Alora's idea, and a very good one, showing again that while she was flighty, the young halfling was anything but dumb. Honestly, Harry would have preferred for Imoen and himself to work on their Blood Magic skills, but Harry also had his alchemy and new Tyr-given skills to practice with. *Elminster was right, setting out too fast would have been a bad idea. We need to learn as much of those skills as possible.*

The group of four reached the house, only to pause when they saw Edwina standing in the threshold. She was glaring at a somewhat fat, middle-aged merchant, who was, despite how cold it was out, dabbing at his forehead as if the man was sweating as the two of them talk. As they approached, Edwina nodded brusquely and held out her hand. "In that case, good merchant, we have a deal. Renege on it however, and it is more than within my rights to set you on fire in the village square and laugh as you turn into a cold, crispy corpse."

The man gulped, but nodded, reaching out a hand in turn. At first, Harry thought he was about to pull Edwina's hand upward so that he could kiss the back of it, but he seemed to think better of it after a second, and simply shook the appendage, before turning away and walking

past the group of adventurers out towards the intersection with the rest of the causeway through the snow.

“What was that about?” Harry asked as he reached the threshold, not having bothered to look at the fat man long enough to activate his Greater Observation skill.

“The man is a merchant; however, his specific abilities lie in making deals and, as he put it, people skills.” Edwina’s sneer made it clear what she felt about that. “One obviously would not think so by looking at him, yet he does seem to have a certain amount of charisma, given what I have seen of him around town. However, one of the dead in the recent battle was his caravan leader, the man who handled the day-to-day operations of his guards and calculations for his caravan. He wished to hire me on to do some of that work while they remain here in Beregost.”

Edwina’s sneer turned into a smirk. “Given that the man is a wine merchant above all else, I felt it was a good deal to make. We will no longer need to purchase wine from the local taverns, as Khalid and I will be better served by what we have access to through that man. And all I will have to do is some paperwork and glaring at rowdy guards, which, for someone of my puissant intellect, will no doubt take me a far shorter amount of time than he expects. I will be heading over there this afternoon to start work.”

While that wouldn’t give Edwina any Stat bonus, Harry was more than willing to let that one slide. *He and Dynaheir don’t really need a boost to their wisdom, and who knows, maybe doing paperwork can help his Intelligence? It’s doubtful, but since he isn’t a Full Party Member, I can’t tell if that even gave him a quest, which is annoying.*

So Harry simply nodded and followed Edwina inside, trying hard not to chuckle as Imoen leaned over to Dynaheir and whispered, “Why do I think that it wasn’t exactly Edwina’s recent mind that attracted that guy?”

That had Dynaheir and Alora both giggling, but Harry decided not to let Edwina hear his chortle at the comment. Edwina was still very touchy about how much interest her magically perfect form garnered the transformed Red Wizard, and she had made no progress in breaking the various magics on the Cursed Girdle of Sex Change, keeping the good while getting rid of the actual curse.

As Harry had known he would find, Viconia was the only one inside currently. Jaheira and Khalid would not return to their work with the town guards patrolling the farms around Beregost until dinnertime. Harry also knew Jaheira was going to use her druidic powers to help some farmers who were dealing with vermin on their farms.

However, that didn't mean that Harry was going to wait for them to get back before he did some interesting stuff. He nodded at Viconia where she was sitting, meditating on her spell book, something that all of the magic users did on occasion, then turned to look at the others. "So, now that we've finally got a clear day out, anyone want to step out into the backyard and shoot arrows or spells at me? It's time to train my Shield Bearer ability."

Edwina instantly turned from where she had been going up the stairs to grab a book of her own. Viconia gently placed a marker in her own tome, setting it aside, her eyes gleaming while Dynaheir and the other two both nodded. "I believe we would all love to, oh illustrious paladin."

A second later, all of them paused as the servant construct appeared. The little house-elf facsimile stared all around at the others, his long fingered hands flexing. "Mr. Harry Sir be letting his friends shoot at him? Dobby be thinking this is a bad idea."

"Normally it would be, my little friend, but along with the ability to call on you, I also gained something else I need to train myself in. And that means I'll need to put myself in a certain amount of danger. Don't worry, I have full faith in my friends not to aim at the bits beyond the shield. There's also the fact that I'll be wearing my full plate armor," Harry said, dryly.

He spoke to Dobby as he always did; as if the phantasm was the real thing. This always made Dynaheir's eyebrows narrow speculatively, while Viconia and Edwina put it down to Harry's general nature and thought nothing of it. Luckily, neither Harry nor Imoen had used Dobby's actual name in front of anyone else just yet, despite the fact Harry had been calling on his Summon Servant spell at least once a day since gaining it.

Dobby slowly nodded and disappeared again with a pop to wherever he went when he wasn't working. Since he'd long since finished all the make-work and even several large-scale projects around the house, Harry had no idea what he did with the spare time but wasn't going to question it either.

The group trooped out onto the backyard, which Dobby spent a few hours each day keeping clear from the snowfall. Now, much like at the Thunerhammer Smithy the swept-up snow had created a tall bulwark all around the small garden, which itself was barely wide enough indeed for Imoen and the other shooters to step away from Harry. Indeed, in a battle, using long-range weapons in such an enclosed space would probably have been a very bad idea, but for testing purposes it was fine.

Pulling out his shield from his item space, Harry noted with some surprise that pulling out only his shield had caused his AAS to give him a warning.

Warning:

The Sword and Shield proficiency requires you to be wielding a single-handed weapon along with a shield.

If you only bring out a shield, your skill with that technique drops to zero, and any chance to block incoming attacks will rely solely on your own reflexes.

Shrugging, Harry pulled out his sword, and the warning disappeared as he informed the ladies about it. None seemed to care, though, and after a moment's reflection, he decided to pull out his helmet along with full plate mail, which he hadn't worn over to Taerom's smithy. *I am going to be shot at here, after all, he reflected ruefully. Best to make certain no accidents occur in every way I can.*

"Alright, I'll hold my shield out to the side to start with, and we'll see how this magical addition reacts to various attacks." Harry paused then stared at Imoen and Alora. "I'd also request no giggles or jokes at my expense when I call upon this technique, but I think that might be asking too much with certain members of this party."

"He knows us so well," Imoen mock-whispered to Alora. "I was just planning to laugh, though, not joke. What about you?"

"Oh, I really prefer to take this kind of thing as they come, so I couldn't possibly say," the chatterbox halfling answered, before smirking. "Although I do have a few ready if his shield doesn't look like much.

"Or better," Edwina added, showing perhaps why she (at the time, he) got along so well with Alora. "If it looks too 'heroic' and could be used as a large lamp at night?"

"Yep!" Alora giggled.

"Yeah, that's about what I figured," Harry grumbled, although his lips were trying very hard to twitch into a smile. "Still, let's get this over with. **Shield Bearer**," he said, his voice deepening as he spoke the words without any instruction on his part. The two words boomed out in the small, enclosed area, bouncing off the walls of snow build-up all around them.

As Alora and the others watched on with varying levels of amusement at that, Harry grunted as he felt a... a strange feeling for a second. As if the mystical energy that was the kernel of Tyr's power that the God of Justice had placed within Harry when Harry became his Champion was reacting. It didn't tug on their deeper connection, the skill not calling on Tyr, but rather that kernel directly.

An instant later, Harry's shield glowed a brilliant purple, white and blue color, as if covered by a solid band of energy.

The others stared, while Dynaheir whispered, "My word," before speaking more loudly, getting in her response before any of the others could. "Harry, from the front, that energy has formed into a symbol on the shield. The majority of the shield is white, while there is a purple balancing scale on top of a blue warhammer. It's actually quite beautiful.

“And bright,” Edwina snickered. “Very much so. I was joking about using it as a lamp, Harry. No need to make that a reality.”

“I knew it!” Alora nearly bellowed, or as much as any halfling could, almost falling to her knees in mirth. “Hahaha! It’s like a shield-shaped beacon!”

“Yeah, I don’t think that it’s going to be a technique ya can use while trying to be sneaky, Harry...” Imoen drawled, smirking.

Viconia just shook her head slowly. Harry read his lover’s (not girlfriend, nor love interest, simply lover) face, interpreting it as ‘of course it’s loud and gauche, much like all the so-called gods of light.’

“I rather doubt that champions of Tyr are called upon to do sneaky-type stuff very often, any event,” Harry retorted with what dignity was available to him at present. “Now come on, we’ve got experiments to run.”

Seconds later, a crossbow bolt from Imoen’s new weapon flashed out, and Harry’s sword and shield skill activated, bringing the shield in line to block the bolt. The quarrel deflected as it hit the energy shield around his new Tower Shield +1 and went up over his head to disappear into the snow behind him. There hadn’t been any kind of bright flash or anything when the physical material of the bolt hit the shield’s energy.

“I barely felt anything there. I think we can upgrade to multiple attacks right away,” Harry mused. He ducked down, presenting his shield in front of him, allowing it to cover as much of his body as it could, which, considering it was a tower shield, it could do quite well. “Have on.”

The two wizards, for once united in interest, obliged, along with Alora. Once more, Imoen’s Army Scythe proved its speed enchantment was amazingly effective, as it allowed her to fire three crossbow bolts in the same time it took the others to get off single attacks and prepare their next, with only Viconia’s speed with her slingstone allowing her to even have her second stone in the air by the time Imoen’s third quarrel left the crossbow.

All of their attacks clattered and clanged off of Harry’s shield, producing no noise nor light, simply bouncing away.

“The lack of noise is interesting. I would wager that you now possess what amounts to a +2 shield there, Harry. One that will not, as long as that energy field is active, take any damage to its Durability as well,” Edwina mused, tugging at his goatee thoughtfully, before a wicked smirk came to him. “Of course, that was all with plebian physical attacks. Are you ready to see what happens when you face a true assault?”

A second later, Magic Missiles flew from his outstretched staff, crashing into Harry's shield. This time, there was a noise, a loud, almost electrical buzzing, louder than even the noise of the Magic Missiles flying through the air as they impacted the shield.

However, once more, they were absorbed, leaving no ripple in the energy field. The impact didn't even stagger Harry.

"I rather doubt it would help against an area of effect spell. Such would simply lap up and over your shield as it would any normal one," Dynaheir murmured. "Unless, of course, you can change the shape and size of that shield as you get to know the Shield Bearer technique."

"That's one of the goals I am going to shoot for, yeah," Harry admitted, standing upright so that he could at least see the people he was speaking to. "Let's switch to a dangerous spell, one with a single impact point rather than the Magic Missile. Viconia, how about a flame strike spell?" He asked, requesting Viconia's most-used offensive spell knowing that she routinely put it in her spell book even on peaceful days. "Let's see what happens when holy energy meets holy energy."

"Very well, it will be interesting to see," Viconia said thoughtfully, mentally adding, *It is broad daylight out, which hopefully means that my lady will not be able to detect what I'm doing. Or if she does, she will enjoy my turning her power on a paladin of Tyr.*

With that, her hands began to move, conjuring the spell into being. A second later, from out of the cloudy sky above, a spear of flame crashed down onto Harry, who had already lifted his tower shield up over his head.

The sound this time was the normally fiery sound of Flame Strike, mixed with the sound of a gong, as if someone had struck a copper bell. The noise had Viconia reeling back slightly thanks to her superior hearing, and the impact drove Harry to his knees, pressing the back of the shield against the top of his armored head. The heat of it flashed out and around the shield at the same time, causing him to gasp a little.

When the spell ended, Harry's Shield Bearer technique was still there, scintillating around his physical one. Harry could tell that its depth had changed somewhat, as if some of the stuff that had made it up had been depleted or canceled out.

"Let's see if that holds true for more powerful magical attacks. Your choice, Dynaheir."

"I believe Acid Arrow would be too fleeting for this, so I will take a page from Viconia's book and go for Agannazar's Scorchers," Dynaheir mused, causing Edwina to scowl and shake his head.

A moment later, after the attack dissipated, Harry reported that he couldn't see any difference between the energy around his shield before or after the attack. "Edwina, you had something to say?"

"Only an observation that should be readily available to any who thinks themselves worthy of using magic," the unnaturally beautiful woman said, sneering over at Dynaheir in such a way that it should have ruined her features. That it didn't was yet another sign of the magic that came with the sex change thanks to the girdle of the same name.

"Agannazar's Scorcher is not a purely magical spell. You create the element of fire and direct it via magic, but there is no magic inherent in the flames thus produced once they leave your hands. Indeed, young trainees back in Thay are often called upon to use Agannazar's Scorcher to start experiments in the labs precisely because it lacks any inherent magic that could cause an adverse reaction. You need something else. Vampiric Touch, perhaps?"

It wasn't a spell that Edwina routinely used, as she knew perfectly well that her part in the party was to deal damage to multiple opponents as often as possible, and frankly the spell also carried with it some horrible memories when Edwin had been a young mage, but it would work for this. "Either that, or a spell that is supposed to instill a specific effect on a target, like Stun, Hold Person, or something similar. Something that a normal magical shield, either your Blood Magic or one of ours, would not be able to block. That could be most interesting."

It turned out that Vampiric Touch didn't do anything. It didn't even reduce the energy within the Shield Bearer technique. The Stun spell that Dynaheir tried did. It hit the shield, and rather than flashing out over Harry's body as it should have, imparting the Stun spell to him, the shield absorbed it, blocking the impact, but decreasing badly.

Another test from Viconia followed quickly, this time a Hold Person spell. With his high willpower, such spells wouldn't have affected Harry over much anyway, but his Gamer's Mind didn't even have a chance to respond, his new technique absorbing it, yet weakening even more than from the Stun spell.

"Blocking the mental attack spells actually took out more of the Shield Bearer's energy than blocking the Flame Strike spell... I think. Not much more, but a bit. And it definitely seems to be less effective against holy magic," Harry mused, staring down at his shield where he placed the edge of it on the ground.

Despite shifting his grip to the top of the shield, it was still attached to him via small tendrils of energy that wound up and around his forearm up to his elbow, and Harry sensed that if he did just leave the shield there and walk away, those bits of energy would snap and the technique would end. "Let's see what happens when it's hit by continual physical strikes, and

then switch to your magical swords, Alora, Imoen. Then, we'll switch again to close-range spells that replace your weapons."

The physical strikes from swords didn't do anything. Indeed, Harry couldn't feel the impact at all, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Shield Bearer technique was doing something even more than a Shield+1 could, even when added to an already magically stronger shield. Imoen, Viconia and Alora's attacks just reverberated off Harry's shield, with almost enough strength to cause the two thieves to lose their weapons.

However, when energy attacks like Spiritual Hammer or the attack from Dynaheir slammed into it, their attacks faded instantly, and Harry's own technique grew noticeably dimmer, barely covering the front end of his tower shield. He also couldn't renew it, couldn't pump more energy into it. Once the technique was cast, that seemed to be it.

For now, Harry hoped so, because in that, the Protego shield spells seemed to be better, as Harry could keep empowering it, while also not losing more health as he did. With Imoen's work on the Blood Magic spells over the past few days, that cost was negligible. At this point, beyond being easier to keep in place, Harry didn't see much of a difference between the two abilities, although he was interested in how the technique could evolve.

The effect on his attackers, on the other hand, was profound, and looking up, Harry's thoughts on the technique changed. Viconia had simply stumbled back, almost falling forward from the momentum of her strike, but able to right herself quickly enough even as her hammer disappeared from her hand. She stared down at where the hammer had been, shaking her head. "Strange. It's as if the technique simply collapsed."

However, having a spell canceled like that for a wizard, no matter his or her specific style, was a very different prospect.

As her Enchanted Weapon disappeared, Dynaheir reeled back with a cry, her hands flying up to her head as a migraine struck her with all the power of Viconia Spiritual Hammer. "Ow!" She yelled, dropping to her knees on the frozen ground. "I, I did not expect that! Their energies slowly dissipating one another, that I had expected. Not to have my spell be, be forcibly canceled like that! Gah, I, can't concentrate on, ugh..."

Alora quickly moved to help the taller human woman, while Edwina sneered from behind her, her artificially gorgeous words causing Dynaheir to turn and glare angrily at the other woman. "That is why the most intelligent of wizards always sends someone else to take part in more dangerous experiments. Thank you for your sacrifice, Witch. We now know that spell could not only render close-in spellwork mute, but also take a mage entirely out of a battle. I rather doubt Harry would ever allow such to survive long enough to regain what little wits such fools had."

“Well, I think that’s enough for right now. Further experiments can wait until Jaheira and Khalid return. We’ll see how it holds up against more magical swords like Khalid’s, and then I’ll also want to see what happens when I use just the technique, and then go through the same experiments with Protego. For now, it’s lunchtime.”

When Jaheira and Khalid returned late that afternoon, the sun was still up in the sky for a given value, showing that the days were becoming much longer, as it was past dinnertime by then. The local equivalent of seven or so, yet the sun was still somewhere in the sky behind the clouds.

With Jaheira and the others watching on from around the periphery of the small backyard, Harry and Khalid faced off against one another. When Harry called on the Shield Bearer technique, Jaheira slowly shook her head. “Well, Harry has never struck me as particularly subtle except perhaps in some of his strategies. Indeed, no paladin has ever been labeled that in perhaps the entire history of this planet. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that a technique gifted to Harry as a champion of Tyr looks so bright and offensively holy as to act like a goad to all those of evil bent within sight of it.”

Harry blinked, making a wait gesture before he pulled out his sword, staring at Jaheira. “You know, while you might’ve meant to be snarky there, there is a distinct possibility that could be the case.”

The others all blinked, their brows furrowing, but Jaheira got it after a second. “The sign of Tyr on your shield... if we are fighting those of evil alignment, then yes, that kind of thing would almost certainly cause them to concentrate their attacks on you, if they are not outright frightened into flight. Considering how much of an armored wall you are, can only be good for the rest of us.”

“Again, you’re joking, but I’m not. If I can do that mid combat say, when one of you is in danger of being slain or wounded, and I can drag their attention to me, that could be extremely useful,” Harry mused. *And would make it better than the Protego in that aspect, at least.*

Jaheira and all the others slowly nodded. It would indeed be very helpful in that case. For now, there were other experiments that they could run rather than ponder one they couldn’t. The shield hadn’t made Edwina or Viconia want to attack Harry, after all.

Once Harry gave him the okay, Khalid moved forward, his movements fluid and precise, showing no hesitancy despite the treacherous nature of the ground beneath them or his full plate armor. Khalid’s personal blade, with its +1 to Attack, +4 to Defense, flicked into Harry’s shield several times. In response, Harry raised his shield and tried to batter aside the attacks, his sword-and-shield ability automatically coming into play.

After a second, Harry called a halt, and Khalid backed away, humming thoughtfully. “I, I, it did not feel as if I was h, h, hitting anything, but I was getting s, s, some measure of blowback, as if w, w what I was hitting was making my longsword r, r, rebound all the stronger. Far more so t, t t, than hitting a normal shield, e, e, even a magical one. How did it impact the d, d, durability of my weapon?”

Harry looked and shook his head, indicating that it was a negligible amount. “I think the greater defensive ability of your sword's enchantments mitigated any damage Imoen and Alora used earlier.” Both girls' nonmagical blades had lost nearly half their Durability by the time they finished that exercise, and even their magical blades, +1 for Alora, and +2 for Imoen, had shown a marked impact on their Durability score.

At that point Harry asked his companions if any of them had any other tests they wanted to run on the Shield Bearer technique when in use with an already existing physical shield, but none did. Rather, all of them were looking forward to seeing what happened when the Shield Bearer technique was acting on its own.

With that, Harry set his tower shield down on the ground, and as soon as he did, the Shield Bearer technique faded, snapping as he removed it from his person. He wondered idly if that was always going to be the case, or if it had something to do with the shield itself. The Shield Bearer technique was basically being cast on that specific item after all.

Pulling up the information on the technique again, he noticed that his two uses had raised his understanding to 30%. A decent amount, but Harry wanted to experiment further. Still, he'd need to wait another four hours before he could use it again. “Alright, let's switch to Protego. Imoen, your turn to be a target, I think.”

“URK. Great, just great. Permission to wear the Shadow Armor just in case for this one?” Imoen answered, staring up at the sky. They still had another hour of sunlight at least, but the shadows were getting long.

“Permission granted,” Harry intoned formally, despite his twitching lips.

Used openly rather than clandestinely, the Protego shield proved better in some ways and less disruptive in others. The impact of Viconia's Flame strike had Imoen gasping, the shield flickering out, the impact on her mind and Willpower much worse than the Shield Bearer had allowed for. Further, enemy spells like Enchanted Weapon or Jaheira's Shillelagh didn't dissipate on impact.

While able to be shaped in various ways, the spell shielded against element attacks just as well as the Shield Bearer. It provided no protection against mental assault, and when Edwina used a Spell Thrust technique, Harry was unsurprised to see Imoen's spell fail completely.

All in all, this had been interesting, and everyone went to bed that night with a feeling of accomplishment.

The next day, Harry and his helpers, a term he very carefully did not voice, were back at it. This time, though, he called Shield Bearer into being without a physical shield for the technique to mold itself around. Further, as his lips formed the words, Harry closed his eyes, imagining the shield forming, trying to figure out if he could change the shape of it as he and Imoen could their Protego spells.

It turned out that he could, but only to a certain degree. As the technique's information had stated, without a shield to impart itself upon, the Shield Bearer technique created what amounted to a medium shield on his arm. However, the general shape of it was that of a kite shield as Harry had imagined it, even if it didn't have the size for one.

Beyond that, and the fact that there was no backdrop for the energy shield, there was no other difference. The people around Harry reported that they could see through it in some fashion, but it was as if they were staring through several inches of vari-colored water.

For his part, Harry moved the shield this way and that, reporting dryly, "It even has weight to it. How that's possible with something made entirely out of energy, I don't know. Heck, I can even feel the straps as if they were around my forearm."

"Magic of all kinds can be very weird, Harry. Growing up in Candlekeep should've taught you that," Imoen teased.

"Let us see how well it stands up against the various attacks without anything solid to back it up. I'm wondering if there will be more of an energy cost when blocking or parrying nonmagical strikes without that physical component," Dynaheir said, causing Edwina to nod slowly.

For several seconds, the others all fired various long-range attacks at Harry, with Harry doing his best to block them. This time, unlike before, several of those attacks got through, clanging off Harry's full plate armor. However, such was the nature of that armor that none of the attacks registered more than light impacts, with only Imoen's crossbow bolts causing Harry to actually lose a few hit points.

Even that was good to know, though, as Harry had begun to use a tower shield almost from the start of this journey. Feeling personally how ineffective smaller shields were against long-range attacks was a stark lesson for Harry that he mentally made a note of.

The real experiments began only when the magic users started flinging spells. Another Flame Strike from Viconia came down from on high first, and Harry gasped as still more of the

heat passed around the energy shield, the impact driving him to his knees, the flash of divinely enhanced and created flames slamming into his shield.

However, when the impact dissipated, Harry looked at his shield, reporting, "I felt that a lot more than I did when Shield Bearer was enhancing an already existing shield, but it doesn't look to actually have dissipated more energy."

"So the physical component being enhanced by Shield Bearer is what deadens the impetus of a magical attack?" Edwina mused. "Given the nature of most +2 defensive equipment, that makes some sense, I suppose."

Next, Jaheira moved forward wearily, slamming her Shillelagh into the shield. The spell backfired on her as Enchanted Weapon had on Dynaheir, and she stumbled away, shaking her head, yet showing no sign of the agony that Dynaheir had been in for nearly an hour after.

Rather, she seemed disoriented, as if she had suddenly lost the majority of her balance or something similar, and sat down carefully in the snow lining the outer edge of the backyard. "That was a bizarre feeling. It was almost as if, as my attack dissipated, my connection to nature itself winked out of existence for a few seconds. It feels as if it is dissipating already, or we would be having **words**, Harry, but it is a most distressing feeling."

"Would you say it would have thrown you off your attack entirely in a serious fight?" Harry asked intently.

Jaheira nodded seriously, as did Viconia, while Dynaheir simply rolled her eyes at the foolish question. "Most decidedly. That makes it an even better defense against those of us who should not be in close combat than your Protego."

"More than anything else, it makes me wonder what would happen if you, say, rammed your Shield Bearer technique into a wizard's Shield or Armor spell, perhaps even someone using Protection Against Normal, or even Magical, Weapons. It would almost certainly ruin their entire day, for it would be far too short thereafter," Edwina mused, a vicious smile on her face which should have really taken away from her beauty, as it made her look more villainous than even Viconia at her worst, but which did not.

The real surprise came when Harry was faced off against Khalid and his sword. What's more, the defensive nature of Khalid's sword came into play, but Harry and the others could literally see Harry's shield shrinking strike after strike. Without the physical component to define the shield's borders, the shield technique seemed to assume that maintaining its density rather than its form was more important.

"Well, I think this was a most fascinating set of tests. Did any of you have anything else you wished to test?" Harry asked.

“Given your ability to manipulate blood magic spells of yours, I have to wonder if you could do the same with this ability eventually. Where is your understanding of it?” Dynaheir asked.

“My understanding of it has gone up to 62%. Don’t ask me why it’s such a strange number. But I’d really like to try that, yeah, see if I can figure out a way to change the shape of the shield further, maybe even cast it out somewhere else, like I can with a Protego. “I’m also interested in seeing if I could keep a few such shields running at all times rather than just the one,” Harry mused, “Well, that and cutting down on the cooldown time.” It will be interesting to see what happens there.”

All of that sounded fascinating to the other magic users. Several spells in the mage or even cleric and druidic lexicons could do similar things, yet Harry’s comments had brought forth one area where he and Imoen, thanks to their blood magic spells, already excelled: adaptability.

“I think we need to continue with these experiments as much as your alchemical ones, Harry,” Jaheira stated, putting their thoughts into words before frowning. “Your Long Whisper technique as well, Harry. Call upon myself and Khalid when we are out with the guard later today.”

Harry did so, and that experiment also worked. There didn’t seem to be any distance limitation, or at least not one they could test easily. Everyone could then talk to one another wherever they were, although with Imoen and Alora, this proved to be as much a deficit as a positive. The pair filled the ‘airwaves’ with their chatter, which served to annoy Viconia to the point of nearly attacking the pair, and she and Dynaheir apparently got into a verbal catfight that only ended when Long Whisper’s timer ran out.

Still, Harry was pleased with that as well, and the days of experimentation continued.

OOOOOOO

Over the next few weeks, the entire party worked on various separate things, mostly based on Stat crunching. Dynaheir actually surprised everyone by getting into fishing with Minsc to upgrade her Wisdom, even if she couldn’t see it happening. She seemingly enjoyed simply spending time out there in his small fishing hut, listening to his rambling as the two ice fished along with a few other locals now that there was no further danger in the area.

Well, more than a few. Enough of the locals were into fishing that, when Minsc apparently shared the fact he was going to go out to the lake, enough joined them that his desire to see what Harry could do in terms of helping him create the fishing lodge had been left by the wayside.

That was not nearly as surprising as Edwina not killing the merchant for flirting with her occasionally as he did the work of the caravan master should've done for the merchant. Yet it was still up there.

For the week that followed Harry's experiments with Shield Bearer, Harry would practice with Shield Bearer in the morning and then would call the entire group together in the afternoon for training outside the town. This was to practice with Long Whisper and how to use it in conjunction with Harry's Tactics and Formations.

This turned out to be quite a good idea, although not just because Harry was able to create two new Tactics, Close Ambush and Encirclement. No, it turned out to be a good idea because Jaheira and Imoen, in one of the few times they were paired together, found a brand-new Enemy Zone, a monster-spawning point, near the town.

It lay to the northeast, and the group found what Harry's Greater Observation skill told him were parts of the destroyed adamantine golem Thalantyr had sent after Hephernaan. There was also a large blast zone, which had created a large magical miasma that Edwina and Dynaheir could sense, as well as a feeling of evil, of hatred and hate that Harry could feel. There wasn't any sign of where it came from, but the spawn point itself, when they saw it, did bring up a message in Harry's AAS.

Zvart Respawn Point

This spawn point is the result of Hephernaan's battle with the adamantine golem and his retreat to the demonic plain. This created a wound in the world and a magical miasma, which Ao's system of correction turned into a Spawn Point for monsters in much the way that the System would the chaotic mana left on an ancient magical battlefield, only in a far faster time.

This Spawn Point is weak and has yet to grow its own Enemy Zone. It will achieve that eventually, but will never grow to the point of creating larger monsters. It is so new that killing the monsters it spawns for ten hours will cause it to come apart and not reform again.

New Spawn points are often weak enough for this to occur. However, this weakness passes quickly, normally around a single turn of the moon.

Destroying this respawn point did take a while, but against goblins, well, as Tonks put it, "Blessed Lathander, but we are OP to these little things. There was a time when these xvarts could threaten us in large enough numbers. Now, no way. We tore into them like Minsc does your steak, Harry."

This act actually did one more thing, though it wasn't nearly as interesting as it would have been before the last round of level-ups, because Dynaheir had finally made the jump to full party member, becoming a Friend officially as shown by his Advanced adventuring system.

He'd built up enough Respect points with her a while ago, but Trust had seemingly been harder with her than it was with even Edwina. Even becoming a champion of Tyr hadn't won him the last 100 points he'd needed in that category, only 60. But finally, this fight, and how quickly Harry decided they needed to deal with it, gave him the last ten points he needed.

However, Dynaheir requested he not look at her stats just yet. "I do dearly want to look at them, Harry, but I know myself too well. If I am told my stats now, when I cannot level up, cannot do anything about them, I will gnaw at the perceived weaknesses to the point of distraction. I am more than pleased to have taken the final jump and become part of your official Adventuring Party, but I also know myself."

She frowned pensively. "And there are things about me that might show up on my character sheet I wish to think about if I wish to have you see at all."

For his part, Harry had simply nodded, figuring it had something to do with her vision quest, or more about her abilities as a Witch of Rashemen. "I understand, and I won't push. Although I will say now, if you've got secrets, you should know I won't judge and I won't blab. You've kept mine, and I'll willingly do the same for you."

He had chuckled then. "Heh, I'd even say I'd be willing to take an oath to that effect, but I'm pretty much done with Oaths at present."

"I understand, and if it was only my secrets, I would not need to think about this so much. But some of the things you will see, my Skills, may hint at secrets that... well, Edwina was willing to kill and dissect me for before we both joined you."

She had glared at the transformed Red Wizard then before turning back to Harry, her words dropping to a whisper. Not that, thankfully, Edwina was close enough to listen. Harry had pulled Dynaheir aside and started to talk to her the moment the announcement had popped up, knowing their rivalry. "I answered his questions back in Nashkel, but kept some things back which you would learn, and I am not certain even a paladin would look at the Witches of Rashemen and me the same afterward."

Harry had agreed, then teased her about not even wanting to know about how much longer it would take her to level up again, to which Dynaheir had replied that was an entirely different thing. The pair had laughed at that, and Harry had allowed himself to read the top of her Character Sheet before quickly closing it as he'd said he would. Dynaheir was now a level 8 wizard, having leveled up twice since they had met, but, alas, was not very close to level nine. She had 94,000 Experience, but needed 135,000, a fact that had her scowling something fierce.

Not that Harry was in any position to make fun of Dynaheir. While he'd certainly upgraded when he became a Champion of Tyr, including a level up, he now found himself at

151,029 Exp on a 300,000-experience journey to Level 9. Far, far more than Imoen's Exp goal of a mere 110,000 to the same level, Imoen having caught up to Harry's level in their travels. The other thief in the party, Alora, was a level behind her, and had 68,456 experience with a goal of 70,000.

Regardless, Dynaheir was adamant about not sitting down with Harry just yet to go over her character sheet until she could do something about it, and the winter days continued.

After that week, Jaheira and headed deeper into the Forest of Sharp Teeth searching for further information about the Druids that should've made that forest their home, and specifically the Shadow Druid presence, hoping to learn more than the fact that they had simply shifted operations over to the Cloakwood Forest. This didn't pan out, though, and five days after being allowed to head out that way, they came back, dispirited and annoyed. Jaheira had not found any more Druid sign anywhere they could reach, despite being able to travel far faster on her own with her husband than they could with the rest of the group.

Meanwhile, Edwina and Viconia helped Harry train his odd mixture of alchemy and cooking he had discovered. Dynaheir also joined them at some point, but she was more often than not out with Minsc. Now able to be told she had gained a Wisdom point, Dynaheir had become even more interested in fishing than before.

She had also become more wary of Viconia since becoming an official Friend. Enough so that Harry's Greater Observation made a note of it when he came into the kitchen and found the two women eyeing one another.

Dynaheir's wariness of Viconia's influence on you as a priestess of Shar has not gone away at all despite your becoming a Paladin of Tyr. Indeed, she now seems somewhat jealous of it. Not quite your relationship, though there might be some attraction there as well, but she knows that when it comes down to it, you will turn to Viconia for advice over her, and KNOWS, with a certainty that is worrisome, that Shar will eventually force Viconia to act against you.

Why she isn't also jealous of Jaheira and Khalid, who you actually go to for advice much more than Viconia, is a mystery. Perhaps it's a female thing? She hasn't been all that friendly toward Jaheira either...

Regardless of such intergroup tensions, since that wasn't the only one that came about at this point, Harry was able to create two new recipes before winter ended. One was a sandwich, called the Greater Sandwich of Health, which gave the person who ate it ten points of Health, which was pretty good for a small sandwich. The other was an offensive type, the Flaming Hot Sausage. It essentially allowed the eater to create a small tongue of flame that almost looked like the Burning Hands spell that both of the wizards could use.

It was not very pleasant to eat for most of them, although Minsc loved the little things. They were shaped almost like Little Smokies, but intensely hot.

And of course, while they were all working on these various side projects, Viconia and Harry continued to enjoy some time together, although perhaps not as often as many might have thought. Viconia was an incredibly sexual woman, demanding attention and a lot of it whenever the mood struck her, but that was just the point: whenever the mood struck her. There was also the ephemeral nature of that relationship to consider, since she still planned to leave the party when they moved their operations to Baldur's Gate.

Of course, there was also the group dynamic to consider. While Jaheira and Khalid were not irritated by the idea of the younger pair of lovers wanting some alone time in the house, the others certainly were, and after the others had been, in Edwina's words, "Kicked out of our domicile so that you could indulge lusts upon one another," the non-couples in the party put their collective feet down. From then on, it was the young lovers who had to find someplace else to have fun, and Khalid and Jaheira on the sole other occasion they wanted some romance time.

This was nothing in comparison to Viconia and Harry, who at least once out of every three days got a room at Feldepost's Inn in order. Thanks to their standing with the locals, it cost them nothing, even if the room itself was only at the Merchant level. All the inn's Noble and Royal suites were taken up by their normal clientele over the winter, yet the merchant suite was, while more utilitarian, still much nicer than the floor Harry had to share with the boys in the previously spider-infested home of Landrin, or even Viconia, whose place on the second floor was remarkably similar.

Oddly, despite her hot and cold attitude towards the relationship, the two of them didn't always "fuck each other's brains out" when they stayed at the inn, as Imoen once crudely put it. Sometimes, they just talked, spending more time over a meal that Harry had brought along with several bottles of wine from the Jovial Juggler. Sometimes, they played games of chance, argued, or trained against one another warhammer to bec de corbin.

And then there was cuddling. Viconia had never **ever** had that before, someone simply hugging her, holding her close for no other reason than to do that simple thing. It was extremely nice. Which of course made Viconia curse Harry all the more for making her soft, and would start a few days where she would try to ignore him outside of the kitchen and his Alchemical experiments.

Regardless of how his personal relationship was going, the three weeks were incredibly fruitful for all of them. But when Jaheira and Minsc informed everyone that winter was breaking and the snows wouldn't return after a series of hard rains, everyone was ready to move on.

There had been nothing but cold rains for a week by that point, removing a great deal of the snow on the ground, and there was warmth on the wind if not in actuality. That was more than enough for the companions. While there didn't seem to be any kind of time constraints on dealing with the Iron Throne and its mysterious backers, Harry knew that the more time they put off, the greater the chance that tensions between Amn and Baldur's Gate would resume.

Despite the Renown Harry's party had won from the locals, they had no desire to announce the fact they were leaving, just in case there were still spies in Beregost, which, when they discussed it, Edwina assured that there certainly would still be spies. "We didn't destroy Tranzig's overall network after all; we simply removed the head of it. It is almost certain that some of the other locals are watching us, observing for their employer, with no knowledge of who that employer might be."

Alora had backed him up there, piping up with, "One of the other thieves that had been making low-key trouble and then been forced to fight in the siege to make up for it is still around, but he's hiding out now so well that even mean Imoen and me can't find him. That sort is always willing to take coin from anyone, in any way they can. Honestly, I've never understood the need for all that money. It jingles, sure, and coins can be shiny, but they're not the shiniest things out there, nor are they at all interesting. If you're going to steal something, or earn something, why not find something more fun?"

Thus, Vai was the only one who knew they were leaving. She had to be told because the party had been doing this work over the past few weeks, helping patrol the area around the town.

This meeting was as prickly as they always were between Vai and Harry. Whatever spark of flirtation or indeed respect once existed between them had long since gone, replaced with a coldly polite dislike on Vai's part, and a wary watchfulness on Harry's. She still thought Harry was a damn fool for taking in Viconia, but Harry knew that because they had completed his An Oath Fulfilled quest, she wouldn't be able to rat him out. For his part, Harry respected Vai's abilities as a commander, but that didn't mean he agreed with her opinion on the drow or Viconia in particular.

Just because I'm now a champion of Tyr doesn't mean we're going to stop taking people as they come, he thought, watching as Vai turned away from him to bow formally to the two Harpers, before saying a curt farewell to the group as a whole, her words almost a ritual. Right up till the end anyway. "Be safe on your journeys and always remember the respect you have earned here in Beregost. Mayhap the winds of fortune will blow you back this way someday... But hopefully not all of you, and hopefully not for a long while."

"Rude," Edwina muttered.

“Eh, inevitable,” Harry drawled, already turning away. “You can’t please everyone.”

It turned out, however, that Vai wasn’t the only one who knew they were leaving. As they started to march out past the outermost farms to the north, motion in the distance caught Harry’s eye. Well past the farms, a female form had detached itself from a tree, shifting into the barely there dawn light with all the easy, lithe movement of her race and their cousins, the nymphs. From here, Harry couldn’t use his Greater Observation to tell which sirine it was, but she looked to be waiting for them.

Or rather, as they came closer, it was clear that Nifiri was waiting for Imoen. She’d spent several evenings at the temple, both speaking with the sirines and the high priest, and Harry had wondered if his cousin/sister had really decided to start following the worship of Lathander.

Imoen left the party for a moment, waving them to continue down the road, as she moved to speak quietly to Nifiri. Harry knew she was Imoen’s closest friend among the blue-skinned dancers.

Whatever they said went unheard from where Harry and the others were, but after a few seconds, the two leaned in, kissing one another so ardently that it made even Viconia’s eyes widen. As they kissed, the sirine removed something from a small pouch, then, as she slowly pulled back, Nifiri clinked it into place around Imoen’s neck. She smiled then, both of them reciting something at the same time. Then, with a final hug, Nifiri shifted away, racing through the woods back towards the temple.

The party stared at Imoen as she approached, with Edwina muttering under her breath, “While voyeurism is not a particular kink of mine, that pairing is one I would cheerfully gaze upon. I see that you have been far more discreet in your dalliances than Viconia and our local champion here.”

“Best not to bruit the champion aspect about,” Jaheira warned, with Khalid and Dynaheir both nodding and firm agreement. “Simply say he is a Paladin of Tyr, and that will be enough for most.”

Harry nodded in agreement, although he kept his eyes on Imoen, who flushed a little bit at Edwina’s words. “Okay, so I might’ve found religion. I’ve, I’ve come to like and approve of a lot of Lathander’s scripture. I wouldn’t say I want to worship him...yet, but I’ll certainly follow him.”

The only other God that Imoen would ever think of worshipping was Mystra, and she had gotten the distinct impression that Mystra didn’t want her to be a direct follower. More a researcher and mad magi-scientist type. However, the Morning Lord’s drive for perfection in all things physical and martial intrigued her a lot.

As did the packages it came in. Seriously, if those sirines were male and able to dance like that, I don't think I'd have ever left that temple, Imoen thought, snorting in amusement at her own thoughts. *As it is, I'm going to seriously miss Nifiri's tongue. And the rest of her.*

"What was that she gave you?" Harry asked, figuring it was polite to ask rather than simply stare at it and see if his Greater Observation skill would be able to tell him anything about it.

Imoen obligingly held up the pendant, smiling faintly as she felt a little bit of warmth from it. The pendant was a simple ovoid in shape, with what was obviously a road carved out leading to a symbol of a sun that rose out of the surface of the ovoid. Harry looked at it for a few seconds, but couldn't tell what it was made of, and it didn't have any Durability to it. Shaking his head, he read out what his Greater Observation told him about it.

The Mark of Lathander.

This pendant is given to any members of his clergy that Lathander's priests or his Dawn Dancers, which is what they're called apparently, believe could join their number. It can sometimes be given as a sign of simple affection, but not often. If you have this, the Dawn Dancers think your future will lead you back to Lathander in some fashion.

It doesn't offer much of a bonus in anything, simply allowing for 80% efficacy at building physical Stats via exercise. However, once given and accepted, this pendant bonds to the person who receives it and cannot be removed by anyone else.

"Hmm... nice. The Morning Lord believes his followers should strive for physical perfection after all, not be handed it," Imoen said almost by rote, rubbing the top of the medal for a moment.

"That's pretty amazing for you actually, isn't it, Imoen? Considering your long-term goal," Harry said, speaking obliquely about her desire to regain her Metamorph powers. If the pendant could let Imoen more easily gain physical Stats, Harry and Imoen could put the points she would earn upon leveling up in the future to her other stats.

Which was not a small consideration, considering that the two of them were Bhaalspawn and received 3 points per level-up to add to their basic Stats. *Even if it is very, very far in the future for me, damn it.*

"I know, and don't mistake me. I didn't even know this thing existed, or how much help it could be. I just... the sirines, the dancing, the chats, what Lathander is supposed to stand for. All of that, it all interests me," Imoen said, ending somewhat lamely in her opinion.

“That is how the morning Lord occasionally finds his followers. They come for the eye candy but stay for the mental stimulation,” Dynaheir grunted, shaking her head. “I know a young Witch who had quite a bright future as such ahead of her who was enticed similarly. She eventually left Rasheman, and I believe that she is a priestess somewhere down in Amn.”

Dynaheir made no mention that the young Witch in question had been her younger sister, or that that decision had not sat well with their family. Such things need not be shared, not even with friends.

“Well, regardless, it’s a good thing you have it, Imoen. I think it will help you a lot in the future. And, whatever you choose in terms of worship, I’ll respect it,” Harry said, chuckling. “Well... unless you suddenly turn to a certain spider-obsessed bitch.”

That sent Viconia into gales of laughter, and the group began making their way down the road, quickly falling into formation. Jaheira and Minsc started to range ahead while Imoen and Alora shifted to the sides, all four making sure that there were no animals or monsters that might ambush them.

It was a cold day, and all of the party was grateful for the work they put into buying winter gear, something they would continue to be grateful for the next few weeks, as the cold frequently lingered deep into springtime here on the Sword Coast. However, while that morning the ground was frozen, it turned decidedly mucky soon after the party had stopped for a quick standing lunch. This made for an incredibly muddy, annoying few hours before they could shift off the road and into the forest.

From then on, the adventuring band paralleled the road, keeping to the more solid areas underneath the trees. It was still hard going, and by the time Jaheira found a relatively dry area for them to spend the night, all of them bar Minsc, Harry, and, surprisingly, Dynaheir with their greater Constitution, were too tired to even bother cleaning themselves or take their cap gear out. They simply slumped one after another to the ground.

Alora went so far as to turn onto her side and pat the solid mix of stone and dirt beneath her. “Good ground, nice ground. Never gonna take solid ground for granted ever again. Mud sucks, and I don’t get why pigs like it.”

The day had been made slightly worse by the group running into several groups of skeleton warriors, and another respawn point, one more dangerous than the Zvart one they’d found near Bereghost. This one spawned skeleton warriors and had built up a sufficient horde over the winter, they could have been a danger even to other adventurers.

However, with his Turn Undead now enhanced from Harry’s power as a paladin of Tyr and added on to Viconia’s own Turn Undead spell, the skeleton warriors stood no chance.

“You know, if not for the clinging, cloying mud, that would’ve been easily the easiest fight we’ve been in since... ever maybe? Since that first kobold spawn point at the very least.” Imoen murmured now as she debated if she could get up and take her boots off. *Nope. Too much effort. Fucking mud.*

“I think that my Turn Undead ability is going to make us a monstrous to any group of undead we see, regardless of what type they might be,” Harry agreed.

The others all grunted or groaned as they started to try and pull off their muddy boots, but Harry had a solution for that particular problem. “Summon Servant.”

The others all perked up, and a second later, two little house-elf creatures appeared. Harry’s understanding of the technique had risen dramatically over the past few weeks because he’d been using that spell every day at least once, and now he was able to summon two of the small house elf-facsimiles. They spoke as one, staring up at Harry excitedly. “Master Harry Sir, you are muddy! Would sir like to have us conjure up some baths?”

“Sir certainly would, along with cleaning our clothing, getting rid of the mud, putting up our tents, and putting the bathtubs in one tent each for the boys and girls, please,” Harry replied firmly.

This caused ragged cheers from everyone, even Minsc, and they quickly began to feel the sensation of the mud basically being pulled directly off of them as if it was silly putty, leaving them marginally cleaner, before their boots were pulled off, their socks, and then more taken off and replaced from Harry’s Complex Item Box by the group.

Soon, the two creatures even began to put dinner on, and Jaheira shook her head, leaning against a semi-clean portion of a tree behind her as she waited her turn for her bath. Alora had won the rock-parchment-scissors tournament. “You truly do spoil us all, Harry. You know that, don’t you? Having gotten now used to such, being apart from you and your various abilities in the future is going to be a wrench indeed.”

“I prefer to think of myself as a leader properly looking after the logistics of his adventuring party,” Harry drawled, waving idly as he entered the boy’s tent, having won their tournament. *I know using Greater Observation is a bit of a cheat, but still, I’ve earned this, I think.*

The others all laughed at that, and leaned back where they lay, letting the two Dobbys do all the work.

OOOOOOO

Days later, Bentley Mirrorshade looked up from where he was manning the bar in the currently only half-full main room of his inn, smiling as he spotted the group who had just entered. "Jaheira, Khalid, come here you two! Rumor has it that you and your little band got mixed up in that tainted iron problem, and might have solved it, for a given value of the term," Bentley said, waving them over to him before they were more than a few yards into the room. "Tell me all about it, would you?"

"We can't tell you everything we ran into; some of it is sensitive information, but suffice to say that yes, we dealt with the tainted iron problem in Nashkel. It wasn't anything natural, and it wasn't anything the Southerners were doing," Jaheira answered, sitting down at a barstool in front of the proprietor, while the rest of them spread out all around, with Khalid on one side and Harry on the other.

"A group is trying to stir up trouble between Baldur's Gate and the South," Jaheira whispered, leaning forward slightly to do so as she did. "It was very, very close several times, but we won through it, and now, we're training ourselves by targeting quests that link back to the group in question."

"You still say a lot without actually using that many words, my dear," Bentley murmured, shaking his head. "Another group, thus not your group's normal enemies, those evil bastards that begin with Z, but where is this unnamed group based? You would not be coming this way if you did not think it was based in Baldur's Gate or beyond..."

"That is true enough, but we have good coin to pay for news as well as a series of rooms for us. I don't suppose you've added anything new to your wares, have you?" Harry asked, just as Gwyneth Mirrorshade came into the main room. "We'd be able to pay for it whatever it is."

"Frankly, from what I can see of what all you're wearing, nothing I have would be an upgrade to what you're already using. You're one of the better equipped adventuring parties I've seen in a while," Bentley admitted, shaking his head as he waved his wife over.

A priestess of Garl Glittergold, Gwyneth Mirrorshade was able to sense that Harry had changed since the first time they had been through the friendly arm in and smiled faintly. "Well now, it's good to see another paladin. There are few of you on the Sword Coast, and far too much for you all to be doing, especially now that Keldorn Firecam moved on."

"You're able to tell that at a glance? High priest Kelddath knew about my choosing a patron at last because of certain events that led up to it. Is that something that all priestesses and priests can do, just see that someone is a paladin, someone isn't?"

"It depends on their various gifts. Mine, because of my patron, deal with discerning truth, or as we put it, the shine on the true jewel hidden among the fake," Gwyneth answered

with a chuckle. "No worries, young man. I can't tell which of the Triad you're following, but I know it's one of the Three. That's all."

"I don't care so much about you knowing, as other people being able to tell I'm a paladin in the first place. Still, I've known for a while now that sneaking and so forth wouldn't ever be in my cards," Harry mock-lamented, causing both gnomes to laugh.

"Well, you all wanted news, and we want news from the south," Bentley said. "We've had no word whatsoever from Beregost, not since winter closed everything down. Tell us your tales, and we'll tell you what we know."

This took a while, as even without certain secrets being shared, the tales of the parties' adventures to the south made for long listening. Gwyneth and Bentley were also incredibly good listeners, and Harry was grateful for Viconia and Edwina's presence there to interject when the story started to include things it shouldn't. Eventually though, as the nighttime meal had come and gone, it came time for Bentley and his wife to share information themselves.

"We get news from Baldur's Gate even in wintertime," Bentley explained, shaking his head slightly. "The two caravans that stop here during wintertime occasionally send runners back to Baldur's Gate with orders and demands for information, both about their businesses and in general."

"Why don't they just stay in the city then?" Imoen asked in confusion. "Surely having to pay a runner to move through wintertime from here to Baldur's Gate isn't exactly an insignificant sum."

"Those runners are some of the most specialized and well-paid folk you'll ever see. A few of them are even full-time adventurers, although not exactly anything to write home about in terms of skill. As for why the caravans in question stay here rather than Baldur's Gate, the answers simple: taxation," Bentley laughed.

"The city demands a tax on all goods stored in its warehouses, and prices to keep your animals and whatever in you stay at," Gwyneth added. "The Council of Baldur's Gate will take any chance they can to squeeze merchants that come through its walls and which aren't part of the various merchant houses or conglomerates operating within the city itself."

"And this year, those merchants are even more thankful than normal that they're not in the city. There seems to be a plague in the city. Not a particularly deadly one just yet, but one that has closed the city down even further than it normally would be during wintertime." The innkeeper slowly shook his head, leaning forward slightly and whispering, "At least one of the runners came back saying there was evidence that the plague had been deliberately caused by someone from Amn. That's threatened to restart the tensions between Amn and Baldur's Gate."

“There’s been a few run-ins on the ocean between merchant ships, and southern cutters, and vice versa, with most of those going Baldur’s Gate’s way, of course. It’s not known as the Queen of the Sea for nothing. But there’s been a lot more guards, a lot more crackdowns. There’s a curfew in place even calls to cull the city’s rat population.”

“The guards in particular have been up in arms for several months now. Apparently, a whole squad of Flaming Fist soldiers on routine caravan inspection tried to hunt down some kind of drow whore,” Gwyneth said, her voice no longer serious, but almost salacious, happy to share such juicy gossip. “Not a one of them returned. She must’ve led them into an ambush or something.”

Harry and Viconia very carefully did not look at one another, simply nodding, as Alora interjected with her own story about how some Flaming Fist officers had tried to run her down, “And all because I simply found one man’s expensive-looking pocket watch in my pocket. It was shiny, but it certainly wasn’t all that interesting when I took a good look at it, so I left it behind, tossed it up into a tree and ran off. The last I saw them, they were trying to figure out how to boost themselves up into the tree. That’s the problem with using mercenaries to keep the peace, you know, I might not be exactly loyal to your laws or what have you but rather lining their own pockets.”

That this took both gnomes’ eyes away from entirely from Harry and Viconia was a very good thing, as they found themselves being looked at by Jaheira and Khalid instead. To their silent interrogation, Harry simply shrugged, indicating that yes, that was the group that he and Viconia had dealt with shortly after making one another’s acquaintance.

Harry hadn’t shared the idiot’s name with any of them, but apparently, judging by what Gwyneth had said, the original message about Atrius Gist had been all too accurate. His family was big news within Baldur’s Gate.

“Well, that’s Baldur’s Gate itself,” Harry said, drawing Bentley and Gwyneth’s attention back to him, from where they’d been looking with some amusement at the young halfling. “Any news of a more general type, or about any place outside the city?”

“Well, the reason why we haven’t added anything new to our stores in terms of weapons and other equipment is that the iron issue is still causing reverberations elsewhere. There have also been several animal attacks reported over the past few days on the first of our spring travelers to arrive. Of which there haven’t been nearly as many as there should’ve been. Foot traffic starts up almost as soon as the snows stop and the rain comes to wash it away from the ground. But we’ve seen, what, a fifth of the number we should have been?”

“Something like that,” Bentley agreed with his wife. “Nothing from Amn, which is understandable, but many who routinely come out to spend a few spring days here, including some nobles, haven’t appeared yet, which is somewhat odd.”

None of that was enough to add information to any of the adventuring party’s ongoing quests, though Harry thought that the animal attacks at least should have. *That’s got to be a sign of the Shadow Druids, right? Although I guess it doesn’t give us any new information. Jaheira told us how they acted, after all.*

“The Ankheg issue also grew over the winter, so much so that the young paladin trying to deal with the issue was forced to retreat to Baldur’s Gate. Which is a pity. Ajantis struck me as being a good sort. The last information we had was that a force of mercenaries has been brought in to deal with it. The Black Talons.”

Harry frowned, looking over the others, but only Khalid and Jaheira looked as if they’d heard the term before. “That is a name indeed among the mercenary bands. They’re more feared than respected, but also more organized than most. They only allow humans to join and are famous for not taking on small-scale missions, only missions that call for at least company strength.”

“T, t, they would probably be perfect for f, f, fighting ankheg, as they wouldn’t care a, a, about their own dead,” Khalid added.

“What about the Chill?” Imoen asked abruptly, speaking up for the first time in a while, as she hadn’t really been taking part in the earlier exchange of tales, instead doing some people watching. “We had a run-in with a group of hobgoblins purporting to be from the Chill, and they were not exactly friendly.”

“There have been some sightings of hobgoblins, but not in uniform or anything similar. More likely they’re just some random bandit group. If they make too much trouble, the Flaming Fists will move out of the city to deal with them, or the Black Talons will be ordered to regardless of whatever current mission there on,” Bentley answered.

“About the animal attacks. Do you remember there being mention of a ranger coming in when you were here all those months ago? He’s been in and out of here numerous times since, dozens of times. He’s always been asking around, hoping to find help, but even adventuring groups turned him down,” Gwyneth interjected.

Bentley shook his head sadly. “The last time we saw him was, what, three days ago? He didn’t say anything this time, simply looked around the common room, demanded a room, paid for it, slept, and then left, with a face carved of granite and anger. I’ve been around the

courtyard more than once, even if I've taken up the role of bartender and owner since. That was the face of a man looking to sell his life dearly for something. Or perhaps, someone missing."

"I tried to get him to open up, tried to get Kivan to talk about what was riding him like a kraken, its tentacles in his brain and body," Gwyneth sighed. "He refused, didn't even bother talking to me after that. And I agree with my husband, Kivan was looking to dig two graves."

That was an old phrase, and one Harry had read about in some books back in Candlekeep, and he grimaced a little. 'For those who seek vengeance, they must first dig two graves' was the whole phrase, and it didn't paint a pretty picture of this ranger's mental stability.

That seemed to be all the proper news Gwyneth and Bentley shared, and soon after, Harry paid for the night so they could get the best rooms available, which did indeed mean that he and Viconia would be getting a noble suite all to themselves. The group started to break up at that point, with Khalid and Jaheira staying at the bar to swap more stories with Bentley and Gwyneth, Edwina pulling out several bottles of wine and moving over to a corner of the room, Dynaheir, Minsc and Viconia heading to bed, Imoen heading off to work the crowd and Harry to find Landrin with Alora.

They found Landrin on the second floor in a small sitting area there, nursing what looked like a mug of mead rather than wine, with a simple meal in front of her. She looked up, her eyes widening before she pointed angrily at Harry. "You! You and your band of adventurers, if I had known that it would take all winter before I heard back from you, I'd not have been so inclined as to let you use my house for so long, which I'm certain is what you did!"

Harry smiled faintly at the somewhat harridan-like attitude, not taking it to heart. They had taken several months after all and could have sent word to Hephernaan when they first cleared out the giant spiders, the job she had initially allowed them to use her house for.

"We would have been back, if not for the number of bandits and other quests we were forced to take on until winter closed in. At that point, Beregost itself came under attack, but your house is safe. Fully cleaned, fully seen after, with all the sheets and everything that we used replaced or at the very least cleaned to a shine. We even repaired some of the damage done to the roof, and a few other small things," he soothed.

The old woman stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. "I really?"

"I am a paladin; I can't lie about something like this, nor would I if I could. The town was attacked. My friends and I helped repel it, working alongside High Priest Kelddath, Officer Vai of the town watch, and various others. Your house is indeed fully intact, waiting for you to move back in," Harry soothed.

“... Well, that, I... I’d never have thought bandits, no matter their numbers, would ever try to take Beregost! Now I’m happy I wintered here. That must’ve been terrifying. I’ll set off for home soon then; there are a few workers here that only work here for the winter for some extra gold, and they’ll be heading back to Beregost. But as for your payment...”

Hephernaan frowned a little, shaking her head. “I know I promised money, but I don’t have much left, let alone whatever else you did to repair and clean my home. Still, I do have this...”

With that, she turned to a small pouch at her side, as if she hadn’t been willing to leave it in her room. Reaching in, she pulled out what looked like a pair of pantaloons made of a golden material that seemed both metal and cloth in one. She held it out, and when a bemused Harry took it and used his Greater Observation skill on it, what he read sounded almost like someone’s sales pitch.

Unknown Pantaloons

“These Pantaloons of a quality heretofore unseen by the eyes of either man or beast. Dynamic styling and comfort that cradles, cuddles and coddles. Seduce your thighs, cajole your calves; enjoy Golden Pantaloons... TODAY!

Trousers you would be proud to take home to mother, if mother rode fast and fought hard.

Note: the magic of these pantaloons is somehow interfering with your advanced adventuring system! You can sense that they are **otherworldly** in some fashion, **intensely** magical. But what that magic might entail, what they are made of, you have no idea, though it might be part of something bigger? It is not recommended you put them on in other words, but they are **certainly still pants.**

“I... would certainly be willing to take that as payment. If nothing else, I can find someone gullible enough to buy them off me for a good price later,” Harry chuckled, trying not to let his surprise show. *I didn’t think any Item could just force its own freaking description on my AAS! I would be worried, but... frankly it just sounds like some deific salesman gave his stuff over-the-top descriptions... with a raunchy bent.*

“Besides, frankly, given how long we were forced to stay in Beregost and make use of your house, it doesn’t feel as if you should be paying me anything,” he added.

Here, Harry’s Renown came into play.

Landrin feels that you’re trying to downplay how active a role you and yours played in saving Beregost, and she feels you fully deserve this payment. Further, they’re just not her style at all.

"I insist you take it. Honestly speaking, I wouldn't be caught dead with those pants on my person, but the irritating man didn't have any other item on him that was worth anything. Honestly, when will youngsters learn, never go into a card game and just magically expect to win," Landrin muttered.

Harry thanked her, and, with Alora gaping at the pants in his hand, moved towards where their rooms were for the night. "Well, go on! Tell me what they are!"

Harry laughed, then read the description aloud. When he finished, Alora's eyes gleamed. "They've got to be part of a set. Part of the shiniest set of clothing out there," she whispered dreamily. "You know, if I thought for one moment I'd be able to keep it in my mind, that sounds like it would do for a great long-term project for a thief like myself."

Harry chuckled at that, and the Golden Pantaloons went into his Complex Item Box, before he very pointedly told Alora good night, continuing on to the room that he and Viconia had been assigned. She watched him go with a laugh, said something about not wearing out his hips, then headed downstairs to find her partner in crime.

The next day, with Jaheira and Minsc in the lead once more, the party left the Inn early and moved over the road and into the outskirts of the Wood of Sharp Teeth. The day was nice and actually somewhat warm, with the mud having hardened and returned to normal terrain over the past two days, without further rain from on high. Both ranger and druid had warned that it probably wouldn't last very long over a hasty breakfast, but it was still an incredibly nice day to travel after the last few months.

That weather continued as they made their way westward, and in the late afternoon the party had pushed away from the toad and any normal sign of civilization into the woods proper. Harry had initially thought to find the road leading directly to the iron and silver mines the party wanted to investigate; however, Bentley had warned that the road led directly to Baldur's Gate and was situated coming down from the city rather than linking into the main coastal road.

Jaheira stopped for a moment between trees, raising her hands to touch a nearby tree, enjoying the feel of the warm sunlight on her forearms, the sound of the wind through the leaves, the pulse of life under her fingers. For just a moment, she stood there, soaking in the feel of the forest, listening to the sounds of small animals moving and the distant twitter of birds. She could sense its jubilation at the coming of spring, the wakefulness rousing within the trees and other plants as life emerged from its winter hibernation.

And yet... As the druid stood there, Jaheira began to frown a little, for beneath that feeling was a watchfulness she could now sense clearly, as she had not earlier in their trek.

This was not the watchfulness of a normal forest. Many giant forests had that kind of feeling to them, even those that did not have the touch of her Mother's people, their awareness brought awake and solidified by the magic of the elves. Even the most nonmagical forest was still a vast, interconnected environment, a living, breathing thing for all its lack of sentience.

But this was different. Druids were here, and had spread their influence. *And not just a subtle influence either. I can feel that the will of the forest is being manipulated, hardened... and set against those who do not worship nature... There is something dark of purpose here, a corruption of the mind, rather than of the wood and soil.* It was faint that feeling, but it was there.

That, Jaheira had somewhat expected, after discovering that the Shadow Druids had started to act openly here in the Sword Coast. What she hadn't expected was that there would still be the echo of another will in the Wood of Sharp Teeth. It was even fainter, the heart of that will less powerful or further away. It was impossible to tell which, yet it was evident that there had already been druids within the Wood of Sharp Teeth when the Shadow Druids had moved in. *That is a good sign, I suppose, though the fact we are possibly entering Shadow Druid territory is not...*

She was about to open communications back to Harry and tell him of her impressions when the half-elf realized Minsc had nearly disappeared ahead of her through the trees. With a start, she decided to put that off for a second, and hurried after her giant comrade. *It amazes me every day how well that berserk warrior can move in the forest.*

Passing around four trees, Jaheira found that Minsc had stopped between two more, a pair of elms. He was looking down at his feet and had begun to slowly shift backward as she caught sight of him again.

Seeing the stiffness in his shoulders despite his armor, Jaheira slowed, shifting sideways and looking down at what had grabbed his attention.

A series of roots had come out of the soil between the two elms, and right above the ground, they had merged into a very unusual pattern, one with sharp edges sticking straight up. "A trap, a Druid-style trap," she whispered, glancing around.

Druid traps were not traps entirely hidden from sight or created through ropes, pulleys, and so forth. They were instead small patches of ground shaped to ensnare the unwary, less a spell and more a mental command on the area itself. Creating something like this, spear-sharpened wooden knobs ready to pierce an unwary boot, would also take hours of work with the tree, or trees, in question.

“That is what I thought, fair druid, but it is not the only one. If you could look at this branch as well?” Minsc whispered. “There seems to be some kind of substance on it.”

Jaheira leaned in, as Minsc gently took another step backward.

She looked at it, then looked at his cloak-covered arm, pointing back into the right of the way they’d come. “I saw a small rain puddle a few dozen yards back in that direction. Check the water carefully, then clean your cloak. That is Woodsman’s Lament in pulped form.”

Jaheira had found some of that vine earlier that morning, handing it over to Harry, adding another page to his Alchemy ingredients book. “It is a natural paralytic that will paralyze you for several hours if your skin comes in contact with it.”

“This Ranger had feared it was given your discussion with Harry earlier. We will need to be extremely cautious. I barely detected those two traps in time,” Minsc warned.

Jaheira nodded, then, as Minsc moved back the way he’d come, she also shifted away from the traps, whispering, “Address: Harry.”

Carried by unseen winds, her voice was whisked off through the trees, and a moment later, Harry’s voice answered her, a light baritone with a hint of laughter to it, causing Jaheira to involuntarily smile despite what she had learned the last few moments. “Jaheira, what is it? I don’t see any enemies or anything. Are you getting any further impression from the forest?”

“I have,” Jaheira said, forcing her own voice to be serious. Hearing Harry’s voice directly into her ear like this, especially when he sounded happy, was a bit distracting. She explained what she had sensed, and ended with a description of the trap that Minsc had nearly hit. “Have Alora and Imoen start looking for traps. Khalid can also help spot things out of sorts. But I fear my druidic brethren have been very busy this winter.”

Harry’s voice turned serious instantly, and he gave out the order while they were still connected. “Do you think they’re acting on their own, or could they be allied with this Iron Throne business? Sending out raiding parties of animals, fortifying these woods, where the mines are.”

“I don’t think so. Shadow Druids are notorious for not allying with any other group, as their goal is simply to do away with whatever local civilization they think is harming the balance. No, this is simply their strengthening their own position,” Jaheira guessed. “They might be unable to move directly against the mine, though, because of the other druids they have yet to bring over to their side or push out.”

“I’d love to ask how that kind of thing works, but right now doesn’t seem the time. Do you think the Shadow Druids are aware of us?”

“...I want to say no. Despite that trap, the sense I am getting is we are nowhere near where the Shadow Druids, and I could wish we had a name to give them, have set up their new circle. We will probably see far more such traps before that becomes a certainty. Still, with Minsc and my woodcraft skills, and our two thieves on the lookout, we should be able to continue making our way forward.”

“Famous last words, Jaheira. I would’ve thought that a lady of your seasoned experience would know not to tempt fate like that.” Harry drawled.

For some reason, Jaheira felt her lips twitch at the joke. *Annoying young brat.* “Hmmpf, if you acknowledge my experience, Harry, you should be extra careful to not annoy me overmuch. We oldsters tend to know how best to get our revenge,” she retorted.

Harry’s laughter stayed with her for a few seconds as she moved towards where Minsc was. Despite her earlier words about continuing forward, they decided to shift course a bit, heading a little more northward. Relaying this to Harry, he agreed with the course change, hoping perhaps that these traps would come in clumps that they could move through.

They did, surprisingly. Rather than a line, thick or thin of them, the traps were laid out in groups of four or more. Better, as they were noticed, the traps appeared as small circles on Harry’s map in yellow. Not the solid dot of a broken enemy, but a circle, with several clumped together on top of another occasionally.

With so many watching their surroundings for such, the group’s progress slowed, made worse by running into deeper patches of mud and harder terrain. They’d still be only in what Jaheira felt were the second layer of the outskirts of the forest once night fell, and while Jaheira would be more than willing to push on through that, she didn’t think Edwina, Dynaheir, Alora, or Imoen or even Harry, would be able to do the same.

Not without sounding like a herd of moose anyway, Jaheira reflected with some amusement. *Humans. My husband generally wears the same armor Harry does, but he moves silently, fleet of foot, across any terrain. Thanks to Harry’s full plate mail being worked into that ankheg chest plate, his armor’s not nearly as heavy, but our young paladin still moves more like a bull than a man to my ears.*

Shaking that thought off, Jaheira peered up through the dense canopy of trees. Above, she could see the varicolored lights of evening flowing across the sky. “Address: Harry.” *I hope he remembered to redo the Long Whisper Skill.*

“Jaheira?” Harry asked a second later, showing Harry had indeed done that very thing.

“Evening’s begun. I would recommend we try to find someplace to fort up for the evening. And when I say fort up, I mean it, Harry,” Jaheira advised, keeping her eyes on Minsc as

he backed away from another trap ahead of her current position. "Even if the Shadow Druids don't know of our presence, the various animals will, and night in this forest is going to be much more dangerous than the Forest of Sharp Teeth was during winter."

"Agreed. You're still certain the heart of the Shadow Druids' presence is well ahead of us?"

"Yes. Their circle still feels several days' work ahead of our current position. Maybe a week or more." *Which tells me there aren't more than three dozen druidis in their circle. If there were more, the Shadow Druids' influence would be able to be far more densely felt here.*

"In that case, I'll push Imoen and Alora to the north, and we'll shift our march in that direction. You two cut back on a diagonal. We haven't seen any place we could really turn into a defensible position yet, and I really don't want us to need to knock down trees or work with the forest floor to make one. That strikes me as a bad idea," Harry decided, his words ending in a drawl.

"Indeed, that would probably be seen as an escalation," Jaheira snorted.

As the light began to fade all around them, the two scouts shifted, falling back and northward, essentially moving on a diagonal as best they could.

However, an hour later, Jaheira, now in the lead, paused, seeing something to one side. Something that should not have been there, something that had not been there a moment ago. She held up a fist, and Minsc instantly stilled, crouching down, putting an arrow to his bow. The closed fist was a signal for enemies about and to hold position, something they'd worked out long before this. Now, she motioned with that same hand to one side, keeping her hand still in its fist.

As Minsc took up position behind a large tree branch nearly as thick as he was tall that had dropped from a forest giant, Jaheira slowly shifted closer to what she had spotted. After a second, she then backed away just as slowly and silently to join him.

"What did the fair Druids see?" He whispered.

"Spiders," she reported. "At least two are up in that tree over there. And if there are two, they are either there as living tripwires, or there are more around here we haven't seen."

While most spiders were solitary hunters, either lying in wait in their webs or pounce-type predators, giant spiders tended to work together. They didn't need to feed as often as their tiny brethren, but they did need much bigger meals, and working together to take such down was an evolutionary necessity for most giant spider varieties out there.

The two scouts shifted their course through the woods again back eastward a touch to avoid the spiders, with Jaheira reporting into Harry about their find. The rest of the party had been going along pretty well, with Imoen and Alora, with Khalid's help, learning to spot the druidic traps as they would a normal thief's. As druid traps could not be disarmed, they were forced to wind their way through the woods even more haphazardly than the scouts had been moving.

However, as good as Minsc and Jaheira were at moving unseen and silent under their disparate techniques, the rest of the party was not...

Minsc and Jaheira both began to see signs of movement approaching through the trees. More spiders, not coming towards them, but rather moving towards a target to their east and north. Counting quickly, Minsc saw there were a dozen large sword spiders.

However, they were not alone. Astonishingly, even as Minsc spotted the spiders, Jaheira was looking at four large, powerfully built grizzlies coming from slightly further northward. They did not look as thin as they should so soon into spring. Rather, they looked fat and even stronger than normal bears. *Someone's favorite druidic experiments, I would suppose.*

Quickly, Jaheira moved away from them, ducking down to hide in a small hollow between an oak tree's thick roots. There, Forest Meld failed as she once more communicated with Harry and the others. "Address, Harry."

"Jaheira, we've got news," Harry answered almost instantly. "We just got out from between two clumps of traps. We had to double back and go around them entirely, but then Alora was attacked by a squirrel. It legitimately went red in my map, then tried to bite her. Luckily, she was fast enough to avoid it, and Dynaheir hit it with a slingstone. That woman's got great aim."

"Never mind that. You have trouble incoming," Jaheira hissed, keeping her voice low, grateful that Harry's voice wouldn't be heard from anyone around her. Her own voice could be, something they had tested several times around Beregost. Speaking like this was also enough to break her out of her Forest Meld technique, which is why she hid more naturally for a moment. "Spiders, at least ten from one direction and four grizzlies from the other."

"..." Harry was silent for a second, but Jaheira could just picture him giving out orders, shifting the formation of the group. "Stay hidden for now, then come back in at the rear of those grizzlies. Both you and Minsc," he ordered. "We'll meet them near where we are now, then retreat further eastward as a whole unit."

"Understood," Jaheira answered. Cutting the connection, Jaheira waited a moment for her Forest Meld's cooldown time to pass before activating it again. Once more invisible to all

natural eyes, she shifted through the forest around several trees to tap Minsc on the shoulder, then gestured him to start moving again, circling to the right, then around the grizzlies that had trooped past them towards their companions.

0000000

Even before the rabid squirrel attack, Harry had felt on edge. Occasionally he'd spotted something through the woods that his Greater Observation had detected as being strange and unusual. Squirrels standing just a little too silent and watchful as the party passed, a rabbit allowing Edwina to come far too close to where it was crouching in the ground before responding to her presence, it's beady little eyes locked not on her, but flicking over the rest of the party.

Worse was that attack. The squirrel had gone from not even appearing on his map to the red of an enemy just as it launched itself at Alora, whose Hide in Shadows technique had failed for a moment.

Really, faced with human-sized opponents actually makes me feel better, Harry mused even as he began to give out orders. "Khalid, find us a defensive position somewhere. We've got incoming not just from in front of us but behind," Harry whispered.

"Why are we whispering? I've never understood that. I mean, okay, being quiet in places with lots of books and stuff where people are studying, not everyone can block that kind of thing out. But out here? It's a forest. Forests don't care if you're loud or not," Alora grumbled.

"With what Khalid and Jaheira have been saying, the local animals might be spying on us for the Shadow Druids, and I don't want them to know that I can see them coming with my map. In this forest, seeing them coming is going to be an incredibly useful thing, hence why you and Alora have been looking for traps," Harry hissed, staring to one side.

He couldn't identify what particular enemies were coming. Yet something, his instincts, perhaps, were telling him that whatever was coming their way from straight ahead was going to be the brunt of whatever this was. What was coming up behind would be the daggers in the back.

Moments later, as Jaheira and Minsc's green dots on his map moved in a circular fashion to put themselves behind the four red dots symbolizing the four bears they stopped and to one side six more red dots came in from the east.

As Harry watched, Jaheira got in contact again. "Jaheira, what is it? What are those six?"

"Trolls," Jaheira hissed.

Harry scowled, but nodded, thankful for the warning, just as two other trolls suddenly appeared to one side of the group as they shifted towards what looked like a mound of stone that Khalid had decided would do as a defensive point. They appeared on either side of Imoen currently out of Hide-in-Shadows as her technique had failed for a second. Only her automatically activating Flirty Little Lass technique allowed her to dodge their strikes.

Another one appeared next to Khalid, but his shield rose, blocking the overhead blow, which nearly drove the half elf to his knees. Despite that, he whirled into an attack, his sword coming up and slicing, and Harry, cursing, barreled into one of the trolls near Imoen, blocking its strike from where it had been just about to turn on Dynaheir.

Viconia was there an instant later, her hammer crashing into the second troll's head, sending it reeling, even if the blow didn't do all that much damage.

As they fought, a pop-up attempted to get Harry's attention, but he was in no position just now to read it, and so banished it, figuring it was probably a bestiary page. *They're still trolls even if they can use an invisibility trick. No time to wonder about more.*

"Imoen, Alora, pull back and Hide-in-Shadows the instant you can. Dynaheir, Edwina, rush forward and get up on those rocks!" Right now, they were barely visible through the slowly fading light and the trees, but they remained the only defensible position within sight.

"Edwina, I want at least one summit monster spell from you. Have the summons watch your back," Harry hastily began to order, ducking under a strike from the troll, lashing out with a cut and watching as the wound rapidly began to heal. "When we knock a troll down, hit it with a Fire Arrow spell, that's on you and Dynaheir. Viconia, hammer and shield."

With the badly clustered terrain of the forest, attempting to shift into any specific formation wasn't going to work. "Get some distance Imoen, and wait. Don't engage these three trolls. They're just the tip of the jaws coming our way, and I want you to flank the attackers at the best possible moment."

A second later, Alora performed a backstab, but it nearly cost her as the spirit troll twitched around, its open hand crashing into her sending Alora tumbling. She hopped to her feet a second later though, a wild look on her face, even as she raced to join the other backline fighters up on the rocks. The troll had smacked her in that direction, and it made good sense to her. "I love this Shadow Armor! That blow should've had me seeing stars and maybe some broken ribs, but I don't think it took more than a few points of health!"

"I'm happy you're happy," Harry drawled, his Sword +1, with its odd hidden secret, stabbed into the side of the troll, but got stuck on some of his ribs as the wound began to regenerate. Magic sword it might be, but that didn't give it any kind of element-based attack.

He grunted, trying to pull the sword out, when the troll's arm latched onto his shoulder. It's claws couldn't tear into his armor, it was too thick, but it surely hurt, yet Harry released his blade, summoning his bec de corbin into his hand. When next the troll longed down, it's maw gaping now as it went for a bite, the tip of the bec's spear-like point slammed up into the bottom of its jaw.

With a grunt of effort, Harry drag the troll sideways, slamming it bodily into a tree, before Khalid's blade sawed into its neck from the other side.

The half-elf had left himself open slightly for that attack. The troll he had been facing however, had been hit by a Color Spray spell from Dynaheir before she raced off. It was now seeing bunnies and fluffy clouds for a second, and had even sat down to watch them more.

Meanwhile the third troll was down, Viconia's hammer having taken it to his knees, and, even as she was forced to retreat from a desperate swipe, one of Edwina's summoned ogre crashed into it, followed by a magic missile's barrage from him, then an ice arrow from Alora finished it off. Similarly, Harry's Incendio removed the troll's head, killing it as well. The last fell permanently seconds later.

Unfortunately, despite that little win, Harry knew they were running out of time. Looking at his map once more, Harry chivvied the others on towards the rocks before he began to issue orders. "Dynaheir, I'll want a Stinking Cloud spell on my signal. Edwina, set up two Skull Traps behind the rocks just in case another force comes in from behind us and keep your second ogre facing that direction. The other one should remain in the front ranks. Khalid, left with the ogre I'll take center. Viconia, right with your wolf. You'll stay with us for now."

Viconia, who had indeed summoned a wolf with her Level 4 Animal Summoning spell, nodded agreement. While tossing stones and spells was pleasant, since she had been able to build up her Strength stat to what the drow woman felt was acceptable, hitting something with a large hammer was quite pleasant. "Very well. Should I preserve my attack spells?"

"Direct assault yes, but you can use one of your Animal Summoning Spells, and your Cloak of Fear spell as well as Chant" Harry agreed.

Viconia nodded brusquely, pleased. Harry and she had talked several times, along with Dynaheir and Jaheira and Edwina, about using a greater variety of spells in the future along with Harry and Imoen's Blood Magic spells. While Viconia had her own preferences, direct assault and healing spells, she did have other spells in her repertoire.

Chant was a passive defensive spell that essentially gave the caster and her allies a greater chance at dodging or landing hit. Viconia had never used it before ever and had to have Jaheira point it out to her once. The difference that Chant gave the part was marginal, but important,

and it could mean the difference between life and death. Cloak of Fear created an aura of fear around the caster. It would be especially useful against animals, although not at all useful against creatures like trolls.

Within seconds, she was moving her hands to begin the first spell, while Edwina, protesting being ordered about in such a disrespectful manner, left the safety of the rocks to head behind their current position. Both completed their tasks, with Edwina running back and up onto the rocks just as the first of the dozen spiders came into view through the forest.

They weren't alone, though. They had been joined by several wolves and even a few foxes. Not a danger to any adventurer normally, there were so many of the smaller animals that they could be a real threat.

The instant the animals came into view through the trees, Alora, Khalid and Viconia lit into them with arrows and slingstones. One giant spider fell dead, followed by a wolf while several others were injured. Yet the others came on, closing faster and more easily than they would have out in the open.

"Dynaheir, right in front of our position," Harry ordered, and a second later, Dynaheir launched her Stinking Cloud spell. It caught the charging horde of giant spiders spreading out quickly among the trees, which did nothing to protect the attacking animals. Most of the incoming spiders fell unconscious, along with a large number of the foxes and two wolves, causing Dynaheir to fist pump for a second, before grabbing her sling from her waist.

For several minutes, the group at the front held there, killing wolves and foxes as they charged around trees. The terrain was making it very difficult for them to come to one another's aid, but the two conjured animals and Dynaheir's earlier spell kept them from being overwhelmed by sheer numbers combined with their excellent equipment and individual skill. Imoen also began to fire from the flanks, using the Army Scythe to launch two to four bolts before retreating under Hide-in-Shadows and moving on to another position, mindful of Harry's orders.

Better, the foxes were easy to kill. Even a light strike was able to put them on the ground. Plus, Viconia's Cloak of fear was having an impact. The animals around her hesitated, turning yellow on Harry's map entirely, or switched to trying to hit Harry and the others.

Using another point blank Incendio to deal with a spider who had climbed up a tree and tried to dive down on him, Harry ignored the impact on his health, which was rather more than he had taken from their enemies up to this point. Instead, using his tower shield to block another horse, Harry glanced at his map for a moment, cursing. *I hope next time we have a chance to set up a real defensive position. Fighting in woods this dense is the worst, damn those spectral trolls.*

The name had come up in some of the small combat announcements Harry had seen in his AAS, even though he hadn't bothered to read most of the details.

"Alora, Dynaheir, keep hammering the downed enemies. I don't want any of the spiders to rejoin the fight." With their ability to climb trees and move fast through the branches, they were too dangerous to let spread out.

"Edwina, target the wolves trying to flank us on the right with a fireball." It was way past the point where Harry had to worry about the trees and damaging the forest. "Everyone else, be ready to stand and receive on the left!" Harry ordered.

With that, Harry flitted back and around Viconia to take up a new position directly in front of the four markers indicating the bears, getting there before the first charge around the trees in their direction. Alas, those four dots were not alone. Between the time that he had last talked to Jaheira, several giant snakes had joined them, and worse, Harry could see that the trolls were coming on too, moving quickly. There was also something else, a few red dots suddenly appearing, then disappearing from his map.

"Alora, Edwina, watch out, there might be something here using Hide-in-Shadows. Address, Jaheira. Jaheira, you and Minsc wait to engage the bears, let them get stuck in with us first, then do as much damage as possible quickly. I'll also want you to cast your Tangling Vines spell into the area between the front line fighters and Alora and the rest."

A series of Magic Missiles and a Chromatic Orb lashed out from the two wizards. One spider died while the first bear reeled back, roaring in pain. His three fellows charged all around him, closing with Harry.

Harry stood to receive, slamming his tower shield down into the ground and grunting as the bear, a giant grizzly slammed a forearm into the shield with enough force to nearly send him sprawling. As it was, he stumbled back, but bore the brunt of the impact, and his retrieved sword came up in an arc, cutting into the bear's arm. The bear's meat and fur worked as a decent amount of armor though, and the cut was shallow, not even enough to get the bear to back off.

Instead, it roared, lunging forward to bring its jaws into play over Harry's shield. Again, Harry's sword and shield ability came into play, smacking the head upwards, leaving it open to a strike from Viconia's hammer in the side as she shifted around an intervening tree.

The grizzly's blubber though made it almost immune to impact like that, and it roared and tried to hammer her down. Viconia also had two points in sword and shield ability, so her shield, the Medium Shield +1 that they bought back in Beregost was able to intercept the strike, but she

was still bowled off her feet, while nearby, Khalid also found himself smashed to the ground simply by one of the charging bear's mass.

He'd tried to dodge aside, and his sword had stabbed deep into the Bears shoulder. Yet the half-elf had also been sent flying, not having the strength or the chance to set his feet as well as Harry had. He crashed into a tree with enough force to shatter wood, slumming to his rear a second later.

Another bear joined in the attack on Khalid grabbing Khalid by the leg and starting to lift him off of the ground before he could move.

It was at that point that Jaheira and Minsc made their presence known. Minsc wielded his Chelsea Crusher, the massive halberd coming across and into the back of this goal of the third bear, dealing a backstab and critical hit with a roar of "Cleave!" the halberd's head slicing into the back of the bear's head.

With Minsc's strength powering the blow, and the Backstab ability adding still more damage, the bear was dead before it knew it, Minsc's attack having cut deep into its brain. The bear's jaws released any tension thus letting Khalid crash back down to the forest floor. Yet even in falling, it proved dangerous, half burying Khalid underneath its weight.

The half elf wasn't harmed. Indeed, by his stuttered cursing he was more annoyed by the ordeal than anything else thanks to his full plate armor. But he wasn't going to be able to get up and out of from under the bear by himself.

Jaheira caught a lot of the spiders in her Tangling Vines and Harry had once more been forced to discard his sword, it having been smacked out of his grip by a wild back swing from the bear that had smashed Viconia off her feet already. Now, Jaheira and the wolf that Viconia had summoned into being grabbed the attention of the two living bears for just long enough for him to let Viconia get to her feet, and for Harry to pull his *bec de corbin* from his Complex Item Box again.

The spike of the Corbin once again came into play as the bear charged him, and he said it like a short spear, taking the charge, ducking under a blow from the bear and stabbing deep into his chest. The bear was so big that he couldn't actually hit its heart with that stab, but it certainly hurt, and the heat Harry was strong enough to push back against the bear, holding it there, until Viconia hit it with a flame strike, causing the bear to scream in agony and pull away, blood spurting from its chest from the open wound, and rolling on the ground, trying desperately to turn off the flames that kept on coming down from the sky above.

With that one seemed to, Harry twisted around, lashing out with a blow from the hammer side of the *bec* into the shoulder of the last remaining bear. He felt bone break under the blow, yet

was stunned as the bear twisted around, bringing its other paw around so quickly that Harry barely got his shield up in time, and couldn't do anything but take the blow, not entirely off of his feet.

The bear was on him a second later even as Jaheira and Viconia attacked from both sides. Jaheira's staff crashing down on the back of the bear's head several times, doing no damage. The bear ignored Harry's shield as he held it between himself and its attack, and its legs gouged down his armored grieves, kicking up sparks as the bear's claws dented the metal badly there to the point that Harry felt pain and knew he was losing hit points despite his full plate armor.

Before Harry could concentrate enough to bring a spell to bear his vision was occluded as the bear's maw coming down towards his face, and he was forced to lean into it, grunting in pain as it bit into the top of his helmet, nearly tearing it up and off. Thankfully a blow from Minsc came in from the side, slicing into its thigh so badly that it roared, releasing his helmet and twirling around while still on top of Harry.

A swarm of magic missiles struck it then, killing it, and Viconia grabbed Harry's leg, pulling him hard away from the beast as it fell. Gasping and grunting as he was pulled to his feet, Harry shook his head, woozily asking, "those bears were a lot tougher than I expected."

He had barely a second though to contemplate that, before he realized that there were still several snakes in play, two of whom had wrapped themselves around the downed Khalid. Three more were facing off with Jaheira, another was moving toward Viconia, and still two more had moved up into the stone to attack the long-range fighters.

Alora had shifted position in front of the other two magic users and was gamely fighting them off with her short sword, laughing wildly as their teeth couldn't get through her Shadow Armor. "I swear it's like I've turned into a little juggernaut!"

Halfway pinned under the body of the first bear to be downed, Khalid couldn't defend himself, and the snakes were continually attempting to bite into his armor, forcing Khalid to twist his head this way and that. Already his helmet was badly mangled by their bites, and his skin, what little Harry could see of it underneath that helmet, was looking quite green, making the announcement that Harry saw second later quite redundant.

Your Adventuring Party member Khalid has been poisoned.

While not altogether very deadly for its size, the venom will kill him as he loses health at a rapidly escalating measurement.

"Jaheira, healing spell on your husband, Viconia, cure spell, same target. Minsc, get up there!"

Harry ordered in quick succession, twitching around a tree to get close to the snakes on Khalid, killing them quickly. By that point, Imoen and the others had slain all the spiders, and the snakes were also thanks to another Fireball from Edwina turning many of them and the foxes into ash where they were caught by Jaheira's Tangling Vines.

By the time that Minsc reached the rocks and Harry had slain the two snakes coiling around Khalid, the next threat was coming in, the group of trolls. However, there were six trolls, not the four that Minsc and Jaheira had seen earlier, and, like the bears and spiders they weren't alone. Dozens of large Eagles were also flying in from above, screaming avian warcries as they came.

"Edwina, Dynaheir, keep finishing off the spiders and then turn your attention on the birds. Don't let them get back into the air. Imoen, Stupefy spells on three into the flock."

Thankfully, Imoen had followed Harry's orders, remaining to the flanks of the fighting, hidden and not engaging in close combat. Now, instead of attacking the trolls, she hit the incoming eagles with wide area stupefies spells just as Harry did the same. While most of the eagles were able to spread out far enough to avoid Harry's spell, Imoen's came in from the side, from too close, to let them dodge.

Her spell caught a vast majority of the hoard of flying attackers, smashing almost the whole flock out of the air. Then Harry was charging forward, a roar coming from his throat as he moved to intercept the trolls before they could attack his fellows. "For Tyr!"

Before he was about to make contact with the first troll, Harry ducked. Instead of attacking, lashing out not with his bec de corbin, but with a spell, a Bombarda that slammed into the first of the trolls, sending it hurtling back into two of its fellows. The others closed in on him, and he growled out "**Shield Bearer!**" allowing the technique to cover his shield, growling as he took the incoming hits on it one after another after another.

Much like Khalid had noticed in combat with Harry's new abilities, the physical blows lost all momentum the moment they touched his shield now, and this had a profound impact on the trolls. Their blows banged off of his shield, hurtling them off balance, opening them up to renewed strikes from Edwina and Dynaheir, magic missiles for the most part, as the trolls were a little too distant and had several trees between them and the two magic users for any other spell.

Well, besides the Acid and Flaming Arrow spells, but those would need to be husbanded until the trolls were down and could be permanently slain. Something both magic users were more than intelligent enough to realize on their own without Harry demanding it.

Harry's bec de corbin flicked out, the hammer side of it now crashing in on troll knees, another its thigh, a third his hip. Each blow didn't do much damage on its own, but it kept the trolls

entirely focused on Harry, allowing Viconia and Jaheira to go to Khalid's aid, while Minsc finished off the last of the giant snakes to get past the frontline fighters to Alora and the other two up on the rocks.

With that done, Jaheira took command of the others, shouting for Khalid and Minsc to charge forward to help Harry.

"Butt kicking for goodness!" Minsc roared, as he charged him, his Chelsea Crusher out and lashing towards one of the trolls, who lost its arm. As very watched though, the trolls arm quickly began to regenerate, skin and bones literally forming out of the stump as he watched from behind his shield.

One his feet again, Khalid slid forward, his eyes glittering with a bit of heat, not having been happy to be buried under a grizzly. His strike was more purposeful. He ducked under a strike from one of the trolls, then stabbed in and upwards, catching the troll, who had already been down to one knee at that moment thanks to a strike from Harry, in the armpit. Pulling and twisting out sideways, he widened the wound, and the troll howled, one hand reaching up to its throat, allowing Harry to land a strike to the chest with the Corbin's spiked hip, hissing out "Cleave!" at the same time.

He hadn't used that ability with the bec de corbin before, but Harry figured that, since the description of Cleave said he could use it for any bladed weapon, that the beak would count. It seemed to work too, as instead of simply stabbing in, the bec's beak punched straight through and out, tearing out a section of the troll's side.

An instant later, as that troll collapsed to the ground, an Acid Arrow struck it, putting it out of its misery.

However, just as the battle seemed to be settling down into what could be called an orderly manner, the little red flashing dots that Harry had seen occasionally suddenly stopped flashing. He instantly twisted around, using his shield again, with the Shield Bearer skill, to block an overhead blow to the point where the trolls arm rebounded, hurled off balance enough for Khalid to get in another strike. "Edwina, look out! By your feet."

Shifting up from out of a small hole between the rocks that none of the long range fighters had noticed before a squirrel made to bite at his ankle, missing, but forcing Edwina to halt his spellfire. The spell went off in her hands, causing the wizard to nearly fall to her knees in pain from the backlash to her mind.

From behind the group of long-range fighters, one of the skull traps went off, and several dozen other squirrels who had been moving in from that direction squealed, coming out of Hide-in-Shadows, torn to pieces by the skull trap. However, the skull trap did next to nothing to a swarm

of bugs, the Summons Bugs spell. Harry couldn't see where it had come from in the brief second he had to look, but it struck its target cleanly.

Dynaheir began to curse and flail at them, out of the fight for now. She didn't even have the wherewithal to swing her slingstone to try and keep the bugs away, let alone concentrate on a spell.

"Alora, switch to fire arrows" Harry said grunting a bit as a blow got in on through his leg before he could interpose his tower shield, nearly knocking him to his back, but only succeeding to bring him to his knees. A spell lashed out from his shield hand, catching the troll mid thigh, blowing off its leg and depositing it beside him, allowing him to stab it through the head with the point of the bec de corbin. That troll died to an Acid Arrow from Edwina, but she too was quickly preoccupied by the remaining squirrels climbing up rapidly towards her Dynaheir.

Nearby, Minsc reeled backward from a strike to his chest from another troll, and was nearly upended by a another troll's attack from the side. Only Imoen once again announcing her presence with her Lacero spell crashing into one of the trolls stopped Minsc from taking severe injury.

Even as Viconia shifted to try and engage a second troll, the damage had been done. One of the remaining trolls charged past the trio of close combatants they were facing, lurching towards the distant fighters. And none of the four fighting on the front line could pull back and try to engage it again before it was on them, leaping up onto the rocks, battering Alora aside with the simple impetus of it's below.

Unlike Harry's Tyr-given Shield Bearer Skill, the Shadow Armor didn't give Imoen any added defense against raw impact like that, and she went hurtling off of the stones, head over ass to land on the ground with a thump, winded, but not injured beyond that.

The same could not be said of Jaheira, who gasped as the troll's claws slammed into her plate mail. Only the magical properties of the Ankheg plate mail let it stave off that strike, and even so, it was dented by the raw impact.

With the remaining four trolls still on their feet, their injuries regenerating even as fast as the three fighters hit them, none of them could intercede.

Imoen tried, twitching aside from where she had been attacking one of the trolls in the back to help Minsc, the Army Scythe appearing in her hands. Having let her put the birds down with ridiculous ease once they were stunned, now several bolts flew from it, crashing into the back of the troll. The bolts stabbed deep, but did little damage, pressed out from the troll as it began to regenerate.

Another blow smashed Jaheira's helmet off of her head, and sent her to her knees, dazed. Her eyes nearly rolled back in her head at the force of the blow even as the helmet did its job to protect Jaheira from the troll's actual claws.

With a hiss, Harry canceled the Shield Bearer spell on his shield, allowing the next blow from a troll to crash into the already magical shield. Without the momentum deadening to power of Shield Bearer, it lifted Harry up off of his feet and curled him backwards several feet away, yet it also allowed him to gain distance. He hurled out a Protego, which snapped into being around Jaheira, protecting her from the troll's strikes.

Harry paid for this inattention by another blow slamming into his chest, but his full plate armor took the blow, denting to the point where he felt a rib go, but beyond that helping him stave off the attack.

Jaheira's fingers twitched, and she lashed up at the troll attacking her with a Call Lightning spell. The monster reeled away, most of its body turned to slag, yet somehow still alive, not having taken any injuries before this.

Even as Harry took another blow on his shield, Jahiera's fingers were twitching. A second later, lashed out with a Dispel spell towards Dynaheir, dispelling the horde of bees and wasps attacking the witch.

The next second, a spell from Imoen caught another troll in the back, blasting one of its regenerating arms off, causing it to howl, shifting sideways. Then two monsters appeared in front of the troll. The two ogres, summoned into being by Edwina. The troll snarled, hacking and slashing at them and being hammered by clubs in return.

Harry grunted as another strike from another troll got through his defenses, but two of the trolls were down, and Harry twitched away from that one, Pulling out a Flaming Hot Sausage and chomping down on it. This made his mouth burn for second, before he opened his mouth and roared, sending the flame across the two downed trolls, finishing them off.

This left only three trolls, two of them locked in combat with the three frontline fighters, and the one facing off against the rest of the party, who suddenly fell, backstabbed by Alora, then finished off by Imoen. The last two fell seconds later, their legs hacked out from under them too fast for their regeneration to deal with, falling to the ground and then hit by Acid and Fire Arrows spells from Edwina and Dynaheir.

Breathing heavily, Harry twitched his head towards the rest of the party, grimacing internally. *Freaking heck, these trees make any formation impossible. Our visibility is also cut down too much. Far too many of our spells and long range attacks went wide, we should have dealt with those trolls much easier than we did. We'll have to pull the scouts back, react more to direct*

attacks rather than try to plan ahead. Maybe assign teams, small three-person groups to work together? Something to think about anyway.

“Everyone, take out bites of your Greater Sandwiches of Healing. Viconia, another round of Chant, and Jaheira, Defensive Harmony.” That was another defensive spell that impacted the whole band, granting them extra Armor. Jaheira had bought it from Kelddath, and Harry cursed himself for forgetting it.

“Let’s conserve our healing spells as much as possible. Anyone who needs their armor repaired to stop taking further damage head to Imoen or me. We’ll deal with it now,” he said, cursing a little bit at the fact that he and Imoen both had been forced to use several Blood Magic spells. The trolls, the number of surprise attacks, the number of enemies, all of it and and the forest itself, the fact that it basically forced them to separate rather than come together as he’d been training with the party, had badly hampered their ability to deal with this attack.

There were a lot of grumbles and mutters at that, but most agreed, with those who needed to pulling out and chopping down on sandwiches. Quickly they ate through them, feeling the rush of good health returning, their bones knitting together.

Only those who had specifically taken crippling damage, like Harry with one of his ribs, needed the directed healing spell from one of the healers. Khalid was the only other one who needed that, which placed Jaheira near Harry, close enough for them to have a whispered conference while Viconia was healing Jaheira of a bit of head trauma that the sandwich it hadn’t quite dealt with. “Are we likely to run into further attacks like that? And if so, how often?”

“While I don’t know the exact size of the cloak would forest, bears tend to be solitary creatures and have large ranges. We probably won’t face many more than we did already. Trolls? Their normal tribes are twenty-five to thirty individuals, but mostly they move around in hunting packs like the one. We dealt with here. Wolves or foxes, who knows?”

Jaheira shrugged, scowling at her own ignorance. “However, it feels as if this was more of a response towards us moving in the direction we were. Perhaps if we shift our course even more precipitously to the North we will be able to avoid more such for now. I could tell you more, but while I can sense much of the sources of intent in these woods, they do not respond to me more than on the surface.”

As Jaheira finished speaking, a voice intoned from nowhere, almost seeming to come through the woods, causing a reaction from Harry’s AAS.

Someone in the forest has used an advanced version of Forest Meld, Forest Mind.

Created with the power of a circle of druids, the individual in the center of the circle can reach out and influence the forest around them. This can include casting a few spells using trees as a

median throughout a set area of the forest. What that area might be, you have no way of knowing, as there is no way to tell how many druids have joined this specific circle.

Spells that can be used in this manner include a few attack spells, but most fall under the Scrying school. Currently, the individual using Forest Mind has used the similar spell, Far Speaking. You already saw that the Shadow Druids were able to send a Swarm spell after your party.

However, they only did so once. This might mean the Shadow Druids might be less dangerous, or less powerful at least, than they are trying to appear.

All that made Harry's eyes narrow, as it meant he and Imoen's strange abilities had already been seen. That's not good.

Nor were the actual words that came from the trees all around them. "It would be good of you to watch your actions while in this wood. We of the True Circle will not allow those who would act against the natural order to proceed deeper. We are warning you now because you have a sister among you, a druid, who could still be brought to the right path and you would not killing animals or leaving marks of your passage behind. However, continue on your current course, ignore our sister's advice, and you will face the full wrath of the True Circle."

While Harry theorized that was what the Shadow Druids called themselves, Jaheira glared all around them, then began to bark out something in a new language, one that she hadn't used before in front of Harry. It certainly wasn't the Elvish that she and Khalid spoke to sometimes when they wanted to have a quiet word without anyone understanding. Even if it did sound somewhat similar the sentences felt wrong, and the cadence was far more like the growling of beasts than elvish.

Once more, Harry's AAS responded to this new stimulus, giving him some more information.

Jaheira is speaking in Druidic Cant. This is a subset of ancient Elvish that has been set to several very odd, esoteric rules of pronunciation, grammar structure, and emphasis, with all three shifting over time. If you're not a druid and use it, you'd better be a Druid Friend, or tough enough to deal with whatever the local druid send after you to kill you for your knowledge of it.

Harry decided he didn't even want to try to understand it, waited as the trees all around them responded in similar manner, sounding angry, although not quite as angry as Jaheira. After a few seconds, the voice being sent through the trees finished its reply, and the feeling of being watched and studied went away as the voice faded, leaving a volcanically angry blonde half-elf who began to curse in Elvish.

Harry and the others waited, watching Jaheira with all of the attention someone gave a bomb that might well go off if one stepped just a little too close to it, until Khalid held out a flask of

water to his wife, cocking his head to one side. He said nothing, but she took it, nodding gratefully at him and then the others. Taking several long sips of the water, Jaheira composed herself, before stopping it, and handing it back to her husband.

“My apologies for you losing my temper there. The Shadow Druids know me, and of some of my past actions as a druid, and my husband and I both working for the Harpers. Called me out on some of it, taunted, and pushed buttons they should not have.” She bared her teeth for a moment before going on. “Which tells me someone from my past is part of this Shadow Circle. It was not my presence that truly made them give the us that warning. Rather, it was the fact that you spoke of the iron throne moments before that voice began to speak to us in turn. They are decidedly not fans of those that control the mines, but have yet to move against them successfully.”

“Hmmm...” Edwina’s lips pursed, then she sneered. “I would wager they are wishing to see if we can, at the least, weaken the forces of the Iron Throne at these mines? Do their dirty work for them? Although considering they are useless tree huggers, all of their work is dirty.”

“You guess correctly, even if your words make me want to tear your teeth out one by one,” Jaheira answered, sending Edwina a scowl that the Red Wizard returned three-fold. “They hinted that doing so will win us some good will on their part, more than offsetting our slaying so many of the beasts here.”

She looked around at the scattered battlefield, shaking her head. “We should also take nothing but meat from this battlefield. Let nature take it’s course, so to speak.”

Scowling a bit at the fact this was all so vague Harry’s quest The side quest (medium),Shadow Under the Eaves hadn’t updated yet. He could tell Jaheira had more to say, but given how she was looking around, it was also clear she wasn’t willing to say it in a part of the forest controlled by the Shadow Circle.

On the contrary, only the Mine, Mine quest had been upgraded.

The Side Quest (Large) Mine, Mine, as been updated.

The mines in the Cloakwood Forest have been confirmed to be under Iron Throne control. What this means for their plans going forward, you can only speculate, but this is clear. Further, the forces represented there are dangerous enough to hold the hordes of animals and monsters that the Shadow Circle can call upon at bay. What force this might be you don’t know, however it must be formidable.

Learn more about the mines, their size, and what force inhabits it to gain more specific goals such as what you saw with the Blood in the Snow Quest.

Note: The goal of this quest has not changed, only the difficulty. Defeat the current 'owners' and take over the mines, and you will be rewarded by the powers that be in Baldur's Gate or can attempt to take the land for yourself.

Thus, if you succeed, you will be able to follow two paths in terms of what kind of reward you will attain:

1. Take the money and run

If you simply clear out the mines, taking whatever evidence of the Iron Throne's activities you can, and the Council of Baldur's Gate will reward you with 60,000 gold to go with the money you find on sight, which will amount to at least 20,000 more gold.

Please note, the time between you defeating the 'owners' of the mines and receiving the full rewards is unknown at present. It relies on far more than just your success in this quest.

2. Claim the title for yourself

If you wish to, you can start to set down roots by claiming ownership of the land. To do that, you would have to be able to defend them, find the deed to the two mines, submit it to Baldur's Gate, and convince the existing workforce to stay on.

The immediate monetary reward will not be nearly as much, however, there might be hidden rewards if you choose this route. Beyond the unknown, what is known is you will have a source of iron for your own weapons and produce enough silver to make 2,000 gold for every week you are within the Sword Coast territory and able to retain possession of the mines.

That was all very interesting, and indeed the money, now that he'd got more of a handle on what it really meant as an Adventurer in this world, was very tempting. Yet Harry would have preferred to know more about the Shadow Druids. The ability to send a spell their way from some distant point in the forest was worrisome as heck. *Just because they only used Swarm once doesn't mean they can't use it more often, or other spells either.*

"Are the Shadow Druids truly willing to let us go on our way? Are we supposed to trust that they won't try to overwhelm us again so long as it seems we're willing to get rid of a bigger problem for them?" Dynaheir demanded, her voice making that both the question, and her opinion of that question plain

"I wouldn't trust their words if they told me that water was wet, let alone anything of this nature," Jaheira scoffed. "Still, as I said, I don't think we'll see any use of trolls or bears if we make for the north. And once we're out of their territory, they won't attack us again."

"Territory?" Viconia murmured, her eyes narrowing. "They do not claim the whole forest?"

“Oh, they do, but that doesn’t mean they can enforce that ownership,” Jaheira smiled faintly. “If anything, their desire to bring me to their side points at something else entirely.” Her face said she had more to say, but the half-elf stayed silent, looking around at the trees. “Before the Curse of the Dread one was placed upon me, I could have stopped anyone from listening in on us easily. As it is, that is impossible.”

“Hmmm...” Harry glanced over at Imoen, who nodded, understanding what he wanted. Within seconds, the party was hidden under a Mufflatio, which Dynaheir and Edwina both thought of as an inverted Silence spell. Instead of stopping someone from speaking, this spell kept someone speaking from being overheard.

It was put to good use now, as Jaheira told them all about her impressions of the forest. She had shared some of that before with Harry, but now she went into greater detail, having kept on probing the feeling of the forest as they had moved through out the day. By the time she was done, night, which had been building since the battle had started to end, had fallen, but thanks to the number of enchanted items the party had which gave the wearer night vision, it didn’t matter overmuch.

“This other presence, you think the existing druid circle is... what, stronger than the Shadow Druids?”

“No. They have an advantage, I think, but not raw magical strength. Maybe not numbers. But it is is certain that, while the Shadow Druids have begun to send out animals to attack travelers on the road, they don’t control the whole of the forest. I would have us search out my brethren, work with them to get rid of the Shadow Circle,” Jaheira stated firmly.

This was finally enough for Harry’s AAS to activate.

The side quest (medium),Shadow Under the Eaves has been updated. You have discovered more information.

Based on Jaheira’s words, you believe that the Shadow Druids hold sway in the south of the Cloakwood Forest. They have begun sending monsters and animals out to harass the common folk. This campaign of terror hasn’t gone very far yet, but it is building.

Meanwhile the iron and silver mines are to the northeast, with enough military and magical might in place to keep the Shado Druids at bay, if not worry them. There also might be more druids out there that aren’t aligned with the Shadow Druids.

Because of this, you now have two options in how to end the depredations of the Shadow Circle on the civilians of the Sword Coast.

1. Deal with them yourself. Given the dangerous fight you just had, this might not be the best of ideas...
2. Find these other druids and work alongside them. Of course, they might not be any friend of yours even with Jaheira to act as intermediary, but maybe

Rewards: TBD.

For Harry that was no choice. The Iron Thorne was a much bigger, more powerful threat. Dealing with them first was just common sense. Similarly, having backup when dealing with the Shadow Circle seemed a good idea. "We deal with the Iron Throne's forces here in the Cloakwoods first. After that, we find your fellows, Jaheira. I'm not going to force us into fighting the Shadow druids here on our own unless we have to."

"That makes good tactical sense," Dynaheir murmured, with the others agreeing. Particularly Edwina, who was always pleased to have more people around to do the fighting for her.

They didn't see another attack that night, although a nasty thunderstorm came in early morning, forcing them to remain in camp and indeed shift camp to take shelter as best they could in a small cave that Jaheira found. This was no druid warren like she had found previously in the Forest of Sharp Teeth, but it was still nice enough for them to get in out of the rain.

Unable to travel, the group stayed there, and Harry shared his plans for how they would be moving through the forest. "Jaheira, Minsc, you're not going to go ahead of the group as you have been. Instead, Jaheira, you're going to be our sole scout, and you're not going to go too far ahead of us. Only a few hundred yards through the woods. Unless you think you need someone else to help spot traps?"

When she shook her head firmly at that, saying she would memorize a spell to help her further with that and Harry went on, outlining how they would be moving forward, in a series of smaller triangles. Jaheira, would be part of one triangle with Harry and Edwina. Viconia would form another triangle with Khalid and Imoen, while Minsc, Dynaheir and Alora would form the last. They would also start to make use of more passive party enhancement spells. "For now, we'll husband offensive and summoning magic, but we will be doing that on the march so we can use them during battles. However a few summoned wolves would be nice."

The rain didn't let up that entire day forcing them to stay in cover and then travel by night again. The mud proved more troublesome than the nighttime did for all of them yet even with the mud, they actually made good time, and only began to need to break off to rest at about midday.

The next two days passed similarly, the journey broken up more by the weather than anything else as springtime rains battered the Cloakwood forest. More animal attacks hit them, but,

thankfully, Jaheira had been right. No more trolls had appeared, not the regular Giant Trolls or the Spectral Trolls, and no bears either.

The most dangerous animals proved to be the spiders, with their ability to Hide-in-Shadows, but Harry's shift in their formation worked even if, because they were so spread out through the forest, the formation didn't actually give them any bonuses beyond an ability to spot and react to enemies in ambush. That was more than enough.

The fourth day after the pitched battle, ranging ahead of Harry and Edwina, Jaheira paused, holding up a fist, then waving her open hand, indicating she was hearing something in the distance. The group shifted through the forest towards her, and soon, all of them could hear it, the clangor of battle, and the shouts of men in the distance.

"We haven't seen any signs of being near any kind of mining or small settlement," Harry murmured, staring all around them into the forest. "Surely we would have by this point, leftover privies or chopped down trees at the very least."

"True. But recall that we didn't see an attack yesterday, Harry. That could've been a sign that we have finally moved away from the Shadow Druid's true territory. This might be some kind of armed combat zone between the animals of the Shadow Druids and the Iron Throne people."

Jaheira nodded over to the transformed Red Wizard. "That is true. I did mention that they were in direct conflict with both their fellow Druids and the iron throne."

Shaking his head at the idea of splitting one's attention between two different groups of enemies and then picking a fight with a third in them, Harry nodded. "We don't know enough about who's doing the fighting. Imoen, get over here. We'll continue forward under as much cloak and invisibility magic as we can until we see who's fighting, staying in our current trios and spreading out as we go. Watch out for traps, and let's see if we can be the ones to surprise our enemies this time."

End Chapter

A weird thing that I've noticed for both **Bhaalson** and **Butterfly Wings** this month is a tendency for Dragon Naturally Speaking to assume I'm using the word 'bot' instead of 'but' or 'butt'. Also, for some reason a lot of the time I wanted the word 'I' it came out AI... Is the program trying to tell me something? Also quite annoying to deal with.

As for the chapter itself, I wanted to put in the meeting between a certain vengeance-seeking ranger and our group, but that didn't happen here. Unfortunate. I also wanted to put in another sexy scene between Harry and Viconia, but that also didn't happen. I wrote the start of it up, but the bits in Beregost took too long, and I wanted to also Grammarly everything I could, which slowed me down further, so I will need to reuse that bit later.

