

Here is the next chapter of **Bhaalson Remodel**, guys and girls! I had hoped to wait a few days to let Justlovereadin' look at it, but he is about to have some very busy days. Thank him for his service guys, I know I do.

I have Grammarlied this, but I know there will still be mistakes, guys. I just hope there aren't enough to bother your enjoyment of the chapter.

I will post this over on fanfic on July fourth. I want to give you all time to spot mistakes. Enjoy! And yes, this fic still counts as a June fic. The HP and Ranma Polls will be up later today!

Color Key for those who download one of the two versions. Sorry ladies and gentlemen, color doesn't carry over to Patreon, much like it doesn't over on Fanfic:

Green – party-related stuff

Orange – Quest related notifications. (Despite what the fic itself says, LOL)

Blue – NPC related notifications/observations.

Dark red – Enemy observations/bestiary notes.

Red – directly related to combat notifications

Purple – find out in the chapter.

Chapter 15: Skeletal Skirmish, Magical Maladies, and Winter's Arrival

Unfortunately, Harry's questioning of the human-turned-chicken named Mellicamp turned up a big fat blank when it came to the skeleton warriors and the side quest (minor) Things that Go Bump in the Forest. The novice wizard didn't have much in the way of woodcraft and had no idea of the direction he'd been going since escaping the skeleton warriors, who, ostensibly, were the reason behind his attempt at transforming himself.

Harry had some doubts about that, fueled by how shiftily the chicken seemed, thanks to his Greater Observation ability. Well, that and common sense. If he had no woodcraft, why in the world would he have been sent out on an errand into the woods? But Harry didn't see the point of bringing that up now. Mellicamp did describe a few things that might be landmarks,

but not even Jaheira and Khalid had ever been in this area before, so if that was the case, they would have to wait until they were back and able to talk with Kelddath or Vai.

The trip back took them straight back along the route they had followed while heading out. By rights, this meant that they should not have run into any trouble. But barely had they left behind the last lingering scent of the dead wyverns (whose heads Harry had already harvested) that red dots appeared in the distance.

This turned out to be a group of five wolves who, rather foolishly, decided to try and ambush the party. As they did not have any kind of Hide in Shadows or camouflage skill, Harry had seen them coming on the map in more than enough time for the group to prepare. They were dispatched easily before coming within biting range, even if Mellicamp had screamed like a little girl and tried to make a run for it. Alora had been fast enough to catch him, though, and now, over the former farm girl's complaints, she was in charge of holding the cowardly novice-turned chicken.

"Honestly, they weren't after just you, you know, Mr. Chicken," Alora grumbled. "You might be deliciously plump looking, but those wolves were after all of our tasty meat, not just yours. And if you crap on me, I'm going to pluck your feathers!"

Mellicamp quaked indignantly, sounding far more like a duck than a chicken for a moment. "Good gods, woman, stop talking about how tasty I look! I have a complex about it already! Do you have any idea what instincts I am trying to fight here?"

"The instinct to run around, peck at everything, and find a nice female chicken? I was a farm girl, and I know how stupid chickens are," Alora retorted. "Seems to me as if you're not fighting instinct so much as how small your brain box is right now."

That won a chuckle from Edwin and several of the others. For once, almost the entire party was united in their opinion on something, that being that Mellicamp seemed to be a right embarrassment of a wizard.

Yet while the others laughed, Jaheira frowned, staring down at the wolves, then kneeling down beside one of them, running her fingers through the fur of its stomach, shaking her head as doing so revealed how close to the surface the ribs of the creature was. "I had not noticed in mid-battle, but these wolves look as if they are starving. Wolves do not need to eat overmuch, and they are very efficient hunters who are not above scavenging the kills of larger apex predators. Yet these look emaciated."

That caused Harry to frown in turn, the thought occurring to him to question Mellicamp on this before he shook his head. The chicken had been unhelpful thus far when it came to the skeletons that had attacked him, so Harry doubted he would be much help on this score.

“Could the wyverns have... but no, you just said they wouldn’t mind living off a larger predator’s kills. Could the wyverns have driven them off, and they only now came back because we killed them?”

“No. While wyverns would have attacked wolves if they could, wolves could simply run away. Their range is quite a bit larger than most wyverns despite the fact wyverns can fly. I think they were simply roaming around, perhaps spooked out of their normal hunting grounds or just desperate for food. Either way, it implies that the undead problem is far wider spread than we might have thought,” Jaheira murmured.

“Well, we were already going to look into it. I suppose this is just another sign that might be something serious.” Harry shrugged. *Despite the fact it’s a minor quest.* “Unless you think your Shadow Druids would have somehow deliberately made these wolves so thin and desperate so they would attack people like us?”

“No.” Jaheira shook her head firmly. “Shadow Druids would have no need for such tricks. They would simply have commanded the animals to attack. Further, while their impact on the local woods is still here, it has faded too much for them to be anywhere nearby as the wolf races. I have had time to think about it, and I think that wherever the Shadow Druids have gone, it is well, well away from here. It is hard to say for certain, but the feel of the forest is less wary and antagonistic than simply subdued, pointing to the Shadow Druids deciding to remove themselves rather than fight whatever is behind the skeleton warriors.”

“Good enough for me. Now, if my Ranger companion could come over here and we could start skinning these?”

He twitched his head towards Minsc, gesturing with a finger at Mellicamp, but the massive ranger frowned, not understanding. Thankfully, Dynaheir did and whispered instructions into the larger man’s ear. He still looked a little bemused, but more in the way of someone doing an annoying chore as he knelt down next to Harry, placing his hand on the wolf carcass in front of Harry. Edwin and Khalid both realized what was going on and quickly began to usher Alora and the others away.

They weren’t worried about the halfling thief, of course. She was a full party member, something that still stunned Dynaheir and Edwin to think of. Rather, they were worried about the chicken. There was no way they would be able to make certain Mellicamp kept their secrets, except by making certain he didn’t know them in the first place. It was why Viconia was still hiding her normal skin color under a color change charm, and would continue to do so until the party was alone.

Minsc and Harry waited for the others to be out of sight, then Harry used his skill to gather materials, skinning all of the wolf corpses at once. The noise of this carried through the

woods, causing the chicken to twitch, hiding his head underneath the wing as he squeaked, "Oh my word! What is that horrible sound!"

"Our ranger has a skill that allows him to skin an animal all in one go, but it is rather noisy and disgusting. Of course, we then have to prepare the meat and everything else before we put it all in our Item Boxes, and don't get us started on how annoying it is to go through everything to get it back out," Imoen groaned, acting as if she was thoroughly annoyed by the entire process, surreptitiously gesturing to Jaheira to start leading the group away. "Come on, let's let Minsc and Harry to their grisly duty."

Thankfully, Alora, who wasn't the quickest when it came to social cues, didn't call the group out on their little lie. Instead, perhaps in an effort to ignore the chicken she was currently carrying, she turned her attention to Edwin as she asked some questions about whether or not he had ever been out to the sea and what sailing or even just being on a ship was like. "I was only on one once, and it was really nasty, we ran into a storm almost right off the bat, ran aground, and then we had to fight these fishy people off. I can't remember the name of the group, they looked like, well, like fish people on long legs, nothing like sirines or merfolk are supposed to be like. It wasn't fun at all, especially because I was dealing with a major upset tummy. I thought at first it was something I ate, but everyone else said it was motion sickness."

"Eventually, we had beaten enough of them off that we were able to get further in land, but getting back to civilization after that was really hard. Especially because everyone kept on blaming me for things that would go missing. Honestly, it was only me a tenth of the time at most! The rest of the time, it was just the fact that most of them were sailors who didn't know anything about traveling through the woods. I always returned everything I stole when we were together, anyway! It wasn't as if any of them really had anything interesting enough to keep."

It was almost amazing how long Alora could speak without needing a break. Luckily for party unity, those among the group who were most annoyed by such chatter had already been exposed to this and knew they could simply remove themselves. Viconia strode at the head of the loose column as Jaheira ranged ahead and Khalid behind, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the chatter box and still keep her and the two magic users in sight.

Surprisingly, Dynaheir didn't seem as bothered by the girls incessant chattering any longer. Rather, she was bemused by the effect Alora had on Edwin, who answered her questions with observations and questions of his own.

Alora was still talking as the group pushed on a way through the woods, leaving Harry and Minsc alone.

"While she speaks about thievery so openly, Minsc and Boo cannot figure out whether or not Alora is actually a thief or simply too curious for her own good or those of the items she

takes a liking to,” Minsc murmured. “Minsc’s witch also told him that we were hiding your abilities from the chicken as much as possible. Minsc has also seen some of the looks everyone is exchanging whenever it speaks. Minsc and Boo have come to the conclusion... well mostly Boo, has come to the conclusion, that the chicken person is not being as forthright as he should be, yes?”

“Yep. I don’t think Mellicamp’s telling the truth about why he was out here in the woods at all. Why that could be, we don’t know. Unfortunately, I do think he is telling the truth about having no woodsman skills. Which means hunting down whatever problem the skeleton warriors are a symptom of is probably going to fall on us.” Harry shrugged. “Not that it matters much. We’re trying to gain experience as well as help Beregost after all. Now, how long do you think we should stay here and wait to make it believable that we’re cutting meat and everything else?”

Minsc chuckled at that, shaking his head. “For this many wolves, for just the two of us? It would take at least most of the day. But Minsc will return Harry’s words to him. The chicken has no woodcraft. Let us instead wait but a few moments, then go after them. The chicken will also be blind to whatever is going on behind Alora, as he lacks the inches to see over her shoulder.”

“... I’m going to take that as a lesson, Minsc,” Harry said, hopping to his feet and grinning down at the large man, who smiled and pushed himself to his own feet. “Sometimes, the others and I can overthink things a little too much. Simple is often best.”

“Never fear, friend Harry. Minsc input will always be here to show you when thinking is too much, and it is time for the Boot Kicking!” Minsc guffawed.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Harry answered, and, frankly, he wouldn’t. While it was true in a way that his Advanced Adventuring System had pushed Harry and Minsc into the friend/party member territory once Harry agreed to try and rescue Dynaheir, Harry truly did like Minsc as an individual. He had a little bit more trouble with Dynaheir and the fact it felt like she was trying to examine or judge him occasionally, but Minsc had proven to be a true friend many times.

The two of them quickly hastened after the others, catching up with Khalid. The half-elf looked surprised, but Harry explained quietly the point that Minsc and made, causing the older Warrior to grimace as he came to the same conclusion Harry had: that the semi-elaborate subterfuge they had put on really wasn’t necessary in this instance.

Soon, Viconia and the others, even Alora, became aware of the two having rejoined them. Within moments, Alora found herself at the front of the column, talking earnestly with Edwin about various types of ships that she had seen but he had actually been on. It was

actually quite an enlightening conversation about various ship designs, Edwin showing an intimate knowledge of all ocean-going vessels that Alora could mention.

Thay's capital city, which Edwin had been born in, was a major port. Despite the Red Wizards having a certain reputation, trade between Thay and other nations or peoples continued regardless.

Harry was content to just listen to the conversation for a while, using his map to make certain that there wasn't any trouble around them while watching the more distant dots of Jaheira and Imoen until he noticed Viconia, who had pulled ahead of them all to a degree that was a bit worrisome, had stopped. She waited to one side, waving the others on until Harry, who had fallen into step beside Khalid, reached her.

When he did, Viconia gestured down to a point near the roots of the tree she had stopped by. "Harry Potter, I well remember some of your more esoteric abilities. Specifically, the ability to harvest resources. I noticed this and wondered if it would be thought of as a resource, and if so, what would become of it."

Frowning, Harry had to kneel down to see what Viconia had spotted. Nearly hidden under the grass was a tiny number of interconnected mushrooms of some kind. They looked to have slight blue highlights to their caps. As Harry saw them, he saw two notifications one after another so fast they almost blurred into one.

You have discovered a Resource, Blue Tips.

This is a mushroom of some kind that you can tell could be used in a stew or as ingredients to a pasta dish. Blue is not a natural color for a mushroom, but what that might mean, you don't know.

Your Woodcraft skill is not high enough to let you identify it further despite your high Intelligence stat.

This was followed by something even more interesting.

Skill check Passed!

Your Master Chef skill has allowed you to tell that this is not a normal cooking ingredient. It isn't poisonous, but it will have some kind of strange property to it that is beyond the norm.

It will taste like any other mushroom, but you can tell if it is mixed with other things, then the effect of the food might be well beyond the norm. One could say it might be... magical.

Harry explained what he was seeing to Viconia and Khalid, who nodded proudly, while Harry noted he had just earned 50 interest points from the disguised drow. "Fascinating! I

wonder what that could mean. And if we should keep Mellicamp around to be a taste tester to see about these unusual effects.”

Khalid nodded, looking around thoughtfully. “T, t, this land would be good for mushrooms, Harry, a, a, and training your Resource Gathering skill here w, w, would be interesting.”

Humming thoughtfully, Harry touched the item on the ground, and a moment later, another popup appeared, as did nearly two dozen tiny blinking light-white dots. White wasn’t a color Harry had ever seen on his map, but these indicated the number of Blue Tip mushrooms around.

You have moved to harvest a resource, the resource Blue Tip. There are twenty-two other mushrooms available on your map. Would you like to harvest them all and place them in your Complex Item Box?

“Okay... so that’s fascinating. I just learned that once I touch one type of resource, I learn where others are throughout the area covered by my map. And I can harvest them all, just like I did the gnoll ears back by the lake,” Harry breathed.

Without a word, Khalid turned his head to the sky, letting loose a series of bird calls, one bird call after another. When the others looked at him, Khalid explained. “T, t, that is a signal I have used w, w, with Jaheira often in the past. We u, u, use it to tell one another we have spotted s, s, something. In this case, s, s, something interesting I want her opinion on, but w, w, which is not dangerous. I do not k, k, know anything about plants like this, but a, a, as a druid she will be intimately familiar w, w, with all manner of plants.”

Harry nodded at that and agreed to wait. Soon, Edwin, Dynaheir and Minsc all noticed that the trio had paused, with Minsc being the first to see Jaheira coming towards them through the woods. A quick word with Edwin had him, Alora and the chicken moving away from the rest of the group, ostensibly in search of some water, while Jaheira and the others joined Harry and the other two.

An explanation followed, and Jaheira’s eyes widened. “Khalid, you were right to call me back and Viconia, an excellent job spotting them.” That caused everyone’s eyes to widen in turn as Jaheira did not give out praise a lot. “I do not know if I have ever heard of Blue Tips being used in cooking. But I do know that Blue Frost Powder is used by druids or elves occasionally to chill things down. Not to the point of snow or ice, but I know many high elves use it while on the march to cool their bedding down to help them sleep at night. More importantly, enough kept in contact with a limb via a tourniquet can deaden feeling to the limb.”

At that, Harry's eyes widened. The knowledge that Jaheira had just given him had not just given him information, but it had opened up a new type of journal, something he hadn't seen since his bestiary had appeared.

Knowledge Check Passed!

Due to Jaheira telling you more about the Blue Tip Mushroom's uses, your woodcraft skills and Master chef skills have merged to create a new notebook, **Botanical Journal**. This will allow you to keep track of any strange or unusual alchemical ingredients you discover.

Note: the Botanical Journal will not keep track of any recipes you discover or create, only ingredients you discover.

Recipes must come through experimentation!

This was followed by a gold and blue notebook appearing, almost filling Harry's eyes to the point the others noticed his shock and began to crowd around, asking him what was going on. But Harry had no eye for them right now, only what was happening in his overlay as the book opened, flicking through a few pages. Then it stopped, and writing appeared imprinted onto the page.

Blue Tipped Mushrooms:

Called Frost Shrooms in some places, Blue Tipped Mushrooms are often dried and then turned into dust. The uses vary but are mostly used in medical practices by those who can't find a cleric to deaden the feeling in limbs or portions of their body. It is also used occasionally to cool whatever it touches, which could be quite nice in the summer when someone is trying to sleep.

It is also sometimes added to wine in various ways, which will allow for more esoteric effects, such as cooling the palette in small amounts or, in larger amounts, deadening the imbiber's ardor.

Eating Blue Tipped Mushrooms in large amounts is not advisable. It has disastrous consequences for the stomach.

It is tasteless and adds nothing to the flavor of a meal.

When Harry relayed this to the others, he won a further 200 Interest Points from Viconia, and Jaheira instantly turned and ran off through the woods, shouting, "Wait here, Harry!" over her shoulder. Almost out of sight from the rest of the group, she halted, looked around and leaped upwards, scaling up a tree with all the speed and dexterity she possessed.

"What is that about?" Harry asked, confused. He knew this was a major discovery but had yet to realize the full extent of it. *And I never expected staid, serious Jaheira to be able to*

climb like that! Wow. Although, I suppose as a druid, I should've assumed she can pretty much do anything when it comes to being in the woods.

Seeing his confusion, Imoen was quick to explain. "Harry, the key word there, which was used twice, is 'alchemical'! That is a big deal! Alchemy is like transfiguration, only permanent!"

"Permanent effects, or even very strong temporary ones," Dynaheir cautioned, her eyes alight with delight as she looked at Harry closely. Harry idly noticed he had earned 300 Trust and Respect Points with her but didn't question why at the moment. "Harry, if you could make the jump from being an excellent cook to something like this, that would be a power multiplier. Healing potions, potions of celerity, invisibility, the list goes on. Oil potions spread out rapidly, covering everything they touch with tarlike flammable oil that can be hard to remove. Potions that act like fireballs, potions that are to the healing potions we have used as a mighty oak is to a piece of shrubbery!"

As he listened, Harry's eyes drifted off, going dreamy at the idea of all of them being armed with that kind of thing. "Can you imagine the impact of the entire party pulling out explosive potions and hurling them at a single target?"

"I can all too easily think of how the forest as a whole would be scarred by such a thing, Harry. Pray think of some other way to use your powers for good rather than simple destruction," a hastily returned Jaheira teased, lightly shoving Harry's shoulder before she handed him a plant.

This bit of camaraderie astonished and amused her husband in turn. When Jaheira preferred someone, a lot of the barriers that she kept between herself and the rest of the world came down. It was always nice to see, even if it wasn't a sight that he had seen all that often.

Speaking up, he began to tease Harry in turn. "I, I, indeed Harry, I think that the e, e, explosive potion would be one of the m, m, more difficult alchemical s, s, solutions. But if you could even j, j, just brew healing potions, that w, w, would be astonishing. To say n, n, nothing of what Viconia or Imoen w, w, would think if you were able to c, c, consistently supply them with p, p, potions of strength," Khalid pointed out, ending with a jab sent the two weaklings of the group.

Viconia huffed but did not say anything to that, nor did Imoen. It was true, after all. The Gourd of Strength that Harry had given Viconia had proven to be a tremendous aid at the time, and she was still quietly furious at how little physical strength she had. While Imoen knew that strength was one of the many areas this body of hers was deficient in when it came to using her Metamorph skill.

Nodding at this, Harry looked down at the plant that Jaheira had handed him. It looked like a kind of thistle weed but had strange red and dark gray needles, and the bottom of it looked like it had come off a vine.

"You have discovered Grey Thistle Vine.

You can tell from the red tint to the leaves that it could perhaps be some kind of poison, the red used to ward away plant eaters? Or perhaps it could mean something else entirely, considering the grey color.

Unlike his bestiary, which might have been able to call on basic knowledge known to everyone in the world, the Botanical Journal didn't seem to want to tell him anything about the Grey Thistle Vine at first. Harry remarked on that, looking up at Jaheira expectantly.

She obliged easily. "We druids use this plant in healing balms. Plucking out the red thistles will let you boil the rest. It is horrible tasting, but can sooth the throat and often clears away colds or minor wounds without the need of greater magic."

Knowledge Check Passed!

You have learned enough about the Grey Thistle Vine to the point a Botanical Journal page can be created.

Smiling, Harry read the next message.

Grey Thistle Vine:

Called Thistle Vines in some places, Grey Thistle Vines is an alchemical ingredient. They can be used as a whole to steep in teas or broths but can also be cut apart and added into meals or maybe used as parts of more complex recipes.

It is not recommended to eat them raw, but if properly treated by cooking them slowly in mildly heated water after a thorough wash, they can heal you much like the Good Berries that druids can summon.

The Grey Thistle Vine has a harsh, almost chalky taste.

Just so long as you remove the Red thistles. While they can actually taste better than the rest (the red thistles taste like strawberries), they create a **powerful** hallucinogenic effect in any form to whoever eats them. So unless you want to see smells and touch the rainbow, remember to remove all those red spikes!

"Okay... so I think we need to harvest these as well. Even the red thistles could be useful in terms of poisons applied to weapons or traps depending on how quick the effect of them

hits,” Harry mused. “At least, I hope so. As to the rest of the Grey Thistle Vine... Jaheira, do you have that Good Berry spell?”

“Not memorized at present, but I can do so easily, and my staff has a slot devoted to that spell,” Jaheira answered, her eyes narrowing. “Why?”

“I am wondering what will happen if I put them and these Grey Thistle Vines together. Hmm...” Harry mused. “I remember making a berry pastry with them in the Elder Dryad’s grove... hmm... yes, that will at least cover the chalk taste...”

“Perhaps some mint or juniper? Mixing them with a tad bit of dwarfish whiskey might be good as well. Simply adding normal grapes in, too, although it is not the season for those, nor does Beregost have a vineyard,” Viconia interjected musingly, looking intrigued. “This feels both experimental and somewhat intriguing.”

“Yep. This will be an interesting project over the winter. Do you think you would like to help, Viconia?”

“indeed, it sounds like it would be most pleasant. Although I may draw the line at being fed anything that you haven’t already tasted,” Viconia answered drolly.

“We’ll make a date of it then.” Harry tried hard not to flush too badly while Viconia’s smile twitched almost into a frown before then shifting into a sultry smirk as she nodded agreement.

Jaheira frowned a bit at that, looking at the two of them and then over at Imoen, who shrugged her shoulders. Dynaheir, on the other hand, was not so happy about this, fearing Viconia’s influence on Harry, and nodded back. It was time the ladies had a talk with Viconia.

Harvesting the Blue Tipped Mushroom and the Grey Thistle Vines only took a few seconds, but after that, the large group sped up to catch up with Alora, Edwin and their temporary companion Mellicamp the chicken. The party stopped twice more before Jaheira found a place to camp for the night. This added two more journal pages to his botanical notebook, which Harry noted but did not make any effort to delve into. Diving into alchemy seemed to be a long-term project, and right now, they had other things to do.

The next day dawned chilly and wet as it began to drizzle. The rain kept up for most of the day, plaguing the group and making Alora complain about her task as Chief Chicken Carrier. “Ugh, he smells! Chicken feather smell is one of the things I wanted to leave behind when I left the farm! Come on, can’t someone else carry him? I carried him all day yesterday.”

Since that was a valid complaint, Harry asked Imoen to join him in carrying the chicken. The pair of them took turns throughout the day, but unlike Alora it wasn’t the smell so much as

Mellicamp's complaints that bothered them. For all that he had said he was grateful that they had rescued him and were returning him to Beregost, he just seemed to want to complain about everything, up to and including Imoen not letting him nest inside her hood on her back to get away from the cold.

Thankfully, by the time the sun was high in finally rain-clear sky, the group had reached the Temple of Lathander. And the instant they crossed the threshold into the inner temple, Imoen dumped Mellicamp out of her arms. "Finally! Damn, I need to warm up a bit." She looked around and was happy to see that the four sirines were still there, still dancing in the centers of the four glowing blue disks.

Looking to the side, Harry bit back a chuckle as he saw Viconia watching the dancers avidly. She had been wary about entering the temple in the first place, but now she could not take her eyes off the dancers. The same could be said for Khalid, whose mental defenses were next to nothing thanks to the Curse of the Dread One, although Minsc once more proved immune to mental assaults. Dynaheir sneered, while Edwin's appreciation was that of someone looking at a magnificent painting instead of flesh and blood.

When Harry looked at him quizzically, Edwin simply snorted. "I know full well that sirines, even those who have become domesticated, are just as dangerous as dryads. While I will cheerfully give them a taste of the delights I can bring them, I will never allow anyone to try and cloud my mind."

Remembering how Edwin had acted with the Dryad Matron, Harry didn't reply to that.

Kelddath finished with a petitioner before turning towards the clump of adventurers, looking a little amused by how quickly Imoen had moved to speak to the same sirine that she had danced with when she and Harry had come to the temple days ago. As they all watched, Imoen tossed off her cloak and began to move her body with the sirine she had spoken to, while the other three smiled, pleased that Imoen was willing to join them in their prayers to Lathander once more.

When Kelddath spoke to Harry, however, his voice was still chill, showing that his attitude towards Harry and his group at large had not softened, even if he thought that the return meant that they had accomplished the quest he had sent them on. "Harry of Candlekeep. I trust that you have returned with good news?"

"We have." Harry made a show of going through his Item Space for several moments before pulling out the three heads of the wyverns they had slain. He then handed them over to the priest, who nodded.

“Excellent...” His brows then furrowed as he twitched his eyes towards the chicken, who looked as if it was contemplating on either running away or peeing on his temple’s floor. “Why do you have a chicken with you, and why do I seem to see magic all around it?”

Harry wondered if seeing magic like that was some kind of passive high-level priest skill or if it was simply a flat-out gift from Lathander. But he decided not to ask, simply explaining how they had met Mellicamp, who protested volubly, saying, “I can speak for myself, thank you! Honestly, adventurers, barbarians, same thing really. You and I have met before High Priest Kelddath, when I was performing errands and other tasks for my master.”

“That voice actually does sound familiar. But tell me, young Mellicamp, how is it that you find yourself transformed into a chicken of all things?” Kelddath asked, hiding a scowl from most, but Harry’s Greater Observation Skill picked it out and gave an opinion on what it could mean.

It seems as if Kelddath has indeed met Mellicamp and has formed a somewhat negative opinion about him. Or perhaps his master? Either the speaker or the subject has annoyed him.

Thankfully, Kelddath doesn’t seem the sort to hate the messenger, that is **you** at the moment, rather than the topic at hand. However, it should be noted that he doesn’t really need another reason to dislike you.

“I, I was on an errand into the woods for my master. I found myself facing a veritable horde of skeleton warriors and was forced to try a new spell I had read of. As you can see it worked, but I cannot change myself back,” Mellicamp stated, starting weak but ending more strongly.

“Beyond changing Mellicamp back to his human body, those skeletons might be a sign of something else that we wanted your input on,” Harry interjected. At those words, Jaheira came forward, helping Harry explain what she had sensed, the danger and wariness that Jaheira could feel in the forest. As if something dark was stirring within.

“Hmm... I knew something of the danger the Shadow Druids pose. I had a friend among the Druids named Osmadi who warned me of the growing schism within the local circle, but I thought that their focus was further north,” Kelddath mused. “Yet I haven’t heard from him in at least a turn of the moon.”

Harry glanced at Jaheira to see if she recognized the name, but she merely rolled her eyes at him, indicating without words that it was rather silly of him to assume that she. Not only did Jaheira travel the whole world and not just the Sword Coast, but to assume she had met one here was just plain silly.

“This skeleton warrior sighting is entirely new. Could you give me more details?”
Kelddath finished.

“I’m afraid I can’t, Jaheira?”

The druid shook her head. “No. We did not venture deep enough or near enough to this danger to allow him my woodcraft senses to tell me any more about the specifics. Only that whatever danger they are was getting worse. I would assume that means that someone is out there raising these skeleton warriors rather than some random event occurring.”

At those words, Kelddath started, as if reminded of something, but he didn’t say what just yet, asking, “And in that case, distance can only defend us from a threat of this source for so long. And you say Mellicamp was running from them?”

“Mellicamp says he was, although when we met him, he was actually hiding out from the three wyverns in a hollow tree,” Harry admitted. “We didn’t find any trail leading to his hiding place, so we have no idea what direction he came from.”

“And since you two are strangers, I doubt you would be able to even pose the proper questions. But there are markers in the woods I know of, places in the Wood of Sharp Teeth that stand out in comparison to the rest of that wilderness,” Kelddath stated before twitching a finger at the chicken. “Mellicamp, come here.”

What followed was a series of sharp questions from the high priest to the chicken, a somewhat comical sight that had Alora, Edwin and even Minsc snickering. After a few moments, the high priest seemed to have gathered some information about the geography of where Mellicamp had been running that had eluded Harry and the others. Turning aside, he looked over to where the four Sirine and Imoen were dancing. As he did, Harry did the same, his eyes widening, surprised to see Viconia was over there as well now.

She wasn’t dancing, though. Instead, she was looking at the dancers with some interest, taking in their forms and movements. The music of their choir didn’t seem to interest her as much, but when she looked over at Harry, her wicked smirk nearly had him blushing again.
Damn, I’m interested, yet also somewhat afraid of what she’s thinking right now...

At the call from the high priest, one of the sirines shifted away, hopping off of the magical light she had been dancing within. “Meltra, please take this chicken. He is actually Mellicamp, Thalantyr’s apprentice. Set him up somewhere with some corn for now. Harry of Candlekeep and his companions will be back for him to deliver him to his master when they return.”

“Now, wait a moment! Surely, surely you should turn me back into my human form before sending me back home, Kelddath. Priestly abilities can cancel curses just as well as major

spells can, after all!" the chicken squawked. "There is no reason for me to wait any longer, let alone go to my master!"

"Perhaps. But if this was a magical mishap that afflicted you with this form, it is better to turn to wizard-type magic rather than the prayers of a priest, as our prayers might not be able to work on something. That, and I am certain that your master will help you for free, whereas I would charge you for the experience. And at the moment, unless you are somehow hiding a gold pouch underneath those wings, I do not think you could afford my services," Kelddath answered dryly, although honestly, listening to the man, Harry felt the second was far more believable than the first.

"But surely, as a priest of Lathander, you could offer me at least a little bit of charity! It would be so embarrassing to return to my master in this form!" Mellicamp argued. "He might just send me home for this mishap, let alone not returning with what I was sent out to find."

"Then perhaps you should have prepared better for your small sojourn into the woods if so many problems have come of it," Kelddath shook his head as he ruthlessly cut down Mellicamp's hope. "No Mellicamp. I don't run a charity. This is a temple of Lathander, not Ilmater."

"And don't look at us for the money either. We'll transfer you to your master, but we're not going to pony up more money to let you turn back to human now rather than waiting to speak to your master who would do it for free," Harry warned.

With the exchange of oaths that he, Kelddath and Vai had made, it meant that Harry and his party were not getting paid for any of their quests around or within Beregost. They gained experience, yes, but no money beyond what they found on bandits and so forth. This included the fight with the wyverns, which should have given them at least a few hundred coins. While the agreement they'd reached didn't stop them from selling anything, they gathered to get a profit, even there, the low local reputation the party had wreaked havoc on what manner of prices they could get for their items. That was why the glaives and the rest of the things they'd gathered remained in Harry's Complex Item Box. The locals were only willing to sell the party simple things like food supplies. Even cloaks and warm clothing had snot them more than they should have given Imoen's skill with Barter.

Mellicamp tried to argue for several moments until Kelddath simply sent him off with a perfunctory order to the siren who was holding the chicken in her grip.

With Mellicamp dealt with, Kelddath turned to Harry and the two half-elves. "Now that Mellicamp is away, I can tell you more of what I think might be occurring here. I have heard rumors of an evil cleric of Cyric that was seen on the road from Baldur's Gate near the Friendly Arm Inn. At the time, he was accompanied by at least two skeleton warriors. According to the

witnesses, he talked to them as if they were his family. That is honestly why that rumor was able to spread down here despite the distance involved. That kind of sight is something anyone would pass on.”

While Harry snorted in agreement, Kelddath frowned pensively, reaching up to run a hand through his hair, a move that brought attention to how nice and flowing that hair was, a sign that even a high priest like Kelddath still practiced the perfection of the body that was part the faith of Lathander. “That rumor merged or perhaps gave impetus to another. Another evil cleric of Cyric was seen out in the woods at one point, one who seemed interested in challenging men to battle as if to prove her superiority.”

As Kelddath spoke, Harry’s Advanced Adventuring System upgraded the quest he had been given when Jaheira had first noticed the dark feeling of the woods.

Your Side Quest (Minor), Shadows **Things That Go Bump in the Forest** has been updated.

You know now that whatever is going on with the horde of skeletons that Mellicamp ran into, it involves at least one, maybe two priests of Cyric. Given the nature of the Prince of Lies, it cannot be good.

Every priest of Cyric is a rule unto themselves, and whatever goals they have, an evil priest will always prove to be dangerous. Especially one who can raise skeleton warriors.

Rewards: 2000 Experience. Greatly increased reputation With Kelddath and the priesthood of Lathander. Increased reputation among the citizens of Beregost.

Note: As This mission falls under your agreement with Kelddath and Vai, there is no monetary gain here, barring what you find during the quest. If you succeed, however, most of the resentment Kelddath feels towards you will dissipate, and you will be able to make use of his temple’s services.

The impact on your reputation with the local population of Beregost will not be to that extent, but it will still help you with your Bartering skill to get slightly better deals with the locals than you would have been able to otherwise. The locals might even sell to you in turn.

“You know, this isn’t the first time we’ve run into a priest of Cyric. I wonder if that priesthood has anything to do with the iron intake issue we’ve been dealing with all along,” he mused aloud.

At those words, Kelddath and all three of the remaining sirines groaned, interrupting the hymn two of them were still singing even now. “Alliteration, really? I thought that they would teach people better than that Candlekeep.”

And with those words, Harry was amused to note that the sirines had lost interest in him.

While normally sirines, especially those devoted to Lathander, would be very interested in any kind of physical specimen, of which you are one, that comment has added to the overall negative view Kelddath has of you. With that, none of the sirines within hearing will ever be interested in getting to know you further.

“As to your point, Harry, it is possible. Cyric is a God of plots and madness, and the idea of causing a war between Baldur’s Gate and Amn certainly smacks of both. But if so, I cannot help you to discern where they could be based. The religion of Cyric, like many of the dark gods, is looked at askance, even here on the Sword Coast, a primarily lawless land. They could hide here, obviously, given how wild and uninhabited the area is, but you would not find them within Beregost or Baldur’s Gate. However, I can tell you where these two would probably make their lair. It is an area called the Red Canyons...”

From there, Kelddath described an area to the northeast, where the Wood of Sharp Teeth gave way to an area more like some of the territory Harry and the others had seen when they were making their way towards the gnoll fortress than the forest they had traversed the last four days. The land there became much less wooded for a little while, and there were numerous small cliffs and canyons in the area, creating a zone that was a little bit like a natural maze, although an easy one to solve at least. It was the site of a massive battle in the distant past, and there had always been a few skeleton warriors in the area, but not in the numbers needed to make Jaheira feel the darkness of their presence at a distance of four days of normal hiking speed through the forest.

“Wait, it’s four days out? How in the world did Mellicamp get that far out without running into any of the other dangers the forest hides?” Dynaheir asked incredulously.

It was Jaheira who answered, although her response drew a bark of honest good-humored laughter from the High Priest. “The gods defend madmen and buffoons far more than they ought. It seems to be an agreement between them that such bring the best entertainment.”

As several of his companions chuckled at that, Harry had to add his own joke. “Heh, what does that say about us then?” He then became more serious. “Still, that’s a bit further afield than we had expected my party and I would get. Is that alright with you, Kelddath?”

“It is not ideal, but if there is a priest of Cyric out there raising the dead, then they must be dealt with. I would go myself if I had a party here to back me up, but alas, I do not,” Kelddath admitted. “Yes, you can venture out that far without worrying about my thinking you have foresworn yourself, young paladin.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry nodded firmly, grateful for another way to earn back some reputation among the locals. "In that case, we'll head out today."

Moments later, Harry led the group outside, calling the others together to explain the new quest. Deciding that Viconia had teased him often enough and he wanted some payback, Harry decided to try and tease her in turn.

"And I will note, Viconia, that you were just in a temple of the light, indeed, the god most connected to the sun, the antithesis of Shar. And the roof didn't come crashing down all around our ears," Harry quipped. "Although he is the god of physical perfection. Perhaps he only had a problem with your skin color and felt that the good outweighed the bad rather than having a specific racial prejudice."

Viconia chuckled at that, amused and feeling surprisingly flattered at the quip, even as she gestured to Harry's face. "Perfection of form is perhaps something that no male, especially no human male, will ever come close to. But I suppose in your case, you would be allowed within such a temple on the strength of those green eyes."

"Do you have such a problem with the rest of me?" Harry answered easily. "I'm hurt."

"Oh, I didn't say that," Viconia replied, her tone turning sultry as she stepped into Harry's personal space so close their chests, currently divest of armor, were almost touching.

The two of them stared at one another from barely a few inches apart while nearby, Jaheira watched this with a raised eyebrow. The sexual tension between the pair was somewhat off-putting, but so long as they kept public displays to a minimum, she would let it go for now, despite her desire to talk to Viconia.

Edwin, on the other hand, did not. He let loose a loud gagging sound, which caused Alora to laugh. Between those two reactions, the moment between Harry and Viconia broke, and the pair looked away from one another.

Sending a little glare Edwin's way, Harry shook himself, looking around at the others. "Since this quest is going to take a while to get there and back, I suggest that you do some shopping for more supplies while I go see Officer Vai, Imoen, Jaheira. The rest of you, grab a meal in Feldepost's Inn and see if you can grab something for the rest of us as well. Maybe listen out for any new small quests we can do when we get back. The more experience we get, the better."

"I would also ask that while we are all moving around the town, we make certain that everyone here is ready for the weather. Alora, I note that your cloak isn't really standing up to this rain as well as the rest of ours, and it is somewhat thinner than you will need once winter arrives," Jaheira said, her tone going from his normal tart tones to concerned.

If Harry wasn't certain that using the term wouldn't get him a smack upside the head, he would almost have termed it motherly. And he wasn't certain which of the two would smack him for it, considering Alora didn't particularly like being compared to a child. But he knew it would earn him a smack one way or the other.

"Leave any bartering to me, and let's have Edwin and the rest head to a tavern together, letting me and Alora maybe do the shopping. Dynaheir and Edwin don't strike me as the type to be able to Barter well without insulting someone, and Minsc... I don't think you even have any interest whatsoever in bartering at all." Minsc nodded equitably at this, and Imoen looked over at Viconia, who moved away from Harry, her face showing some kind of inner conflict for a moment to Imoen's eye before solidifying once more into its normal expression, one that could scowl, sneer or snort with equal aplomb. "No offense, Viconia, but I'm sure you remember the disaster that happened last time we tried to go to the bazaar. And I'm kind of afraid Jaheira would get the same response. Alora might be a bit of help, though. She can be the innocent sidekick or the wing-girl."

Jaheira snorted at that, having heard the story of that confrontation, while Viconia sneered, looking at Alora for a moment. "Alora, if you see a middle-aged human female with ringlets in her hair and a bodice that is twenty or thirty years too young for her sporting a black eye, feel free to steal everything from the woman you possibly can without getting caught,"

"Eh, that sounds kind of boring, but if she has anything shiny, I might think about it. Honestly, some people. Just putting out something interesting without even thinking that other people might think it is too!" Alora said, shaking her head sadly. "And I've never heard the term wing-girl before."

Harry snorted at that and waved farewell to everyone, turning his feet towards the center of the town and the offices of the Flaming Fists there. For a moment, the others all looked at one another, then shrugged their shoulders and split into the groups that Imoen had suggested. Jaheira could drive a hard bargain, yet with the anti-Elven prejudice Viconia had run into, she understood Imoen's point.

Instead, the married couple walked with the others towards Feldepost's Inn, only to break off and head towards the Burning Wizard halfway there when they spotted a bit of fluttering purple cloth in one of the windows there. Dynaheir noticed, cocking an eyebrow, and Jaheira waved her off, saying, "Do not worry about us. We will meet you shortly. It is just that the Burning Wizard has a few specific wine types that Khalid is most appreciative of."

Internally, Khalid winced a little but admitted that was indeed the case in the strictest sense of the term. After all, he was fond of most wines. Or, as his loving wife would put it, overly fond. And it would do as a cover. The fluttering purple cloth was a subtle signal that an agent of

the Harper's Guild was in residence. Not a full harper, or else the piece of cloth would be dark blue rather than purple, but it was still a good sign that the Guild was reaching out to them once more.

The difference between an agent and a full Harper was in the type of mission they could be assigned. An agent could range from a spy or simply a gatherer of information like a tavern owner to a specialized analyst or messenger. A Harper, in contrast, was always a field operative, someone who could solve problems dealing with violence to diplomacy or hunting down information.

The two of them entered the tavern, and as Jaheira got two glasses of wine, Khalid scanned the room, seeing one individual wearing a glove that had two fingers dyed purple against a black background sitting alone in the otherwise rowdy tavern. There were dozens of small tiny tears on the glove, as if to show a certain amount of age and tear, but to a Harper's eyes, each of those tears signified a mission accomplished. *So, not a Harper but a senior messenger. One that has passed on information to and from before and is trusted to redistribute funds.* That was what the two purple fingers meant. *And one that was not here in Beregost when Harry, my wife, myself, Imoen and Garrick headed south. Good, he can at least take a message for us to the greater Guild.*

Sat down empty table near the man with the purple-fingered glove, and Jaheira leaned back very slightly as she sipped delicately at her wine. "On balance, the day is not always darkest before dawn."

"Nor, on balance, is it lightest before sunset," the man replied, completing the rote exchange.

Jaheira pushed on without further preamble, eager to hear about the wider world. "What news? And from where do you hail?"

"I hail from Baldur's Gate, although I have news from South as well. Waiting for that news to arrive and to be passed on to me is why I am here so late after Khalid asked us to send someone to meet you here in Beregost. It was our plan to have me here waiting for you when you arrived. But from the news I've gathered since my own arrival here, the two of you have been busy. Another link up the chain of whoever is behind this attempt to sow discord between Amn and Baldur's Gate, I take it?" the nondescript man asked.

"That and more. We have also discovered a vile weapon, a Soul Taker dagger. It was used by Durlag Trollkiller to capture the soul of a greater fiend. The thing is vile, and must be destroyed, just like the soul within," Jaheira intoned, her voice dipping down even lower than a moment before, her lips barely moving as she continued to sip her wine while her husband

drank a little more than she did, leaning forward, placing his head in one hand as if tired. "We wish to hand it over to the Harper's for destruction."

The messenger's eyes widened a bit at that, but he nodded hurriedly. "I can take that message, and we can have a Harper specializing in the disposal of magical weapons down here before winter closes in or with the first caravan scheduled to pass through." Despite it not being winter yet, caravans were scheduled well ahead of time. "I can even write a writ of attestation for the nominal ten thousand gold fee to be used here in Beregost if need be."

That was the bounty the Harper Hall paid Harper's for finding such items, although normally, in more civilized areas, it would be five thousand upfront and five thousand once the item was destroyed. But considering the need to either transport it somewhere or bring in a specialist and the fact that Jaheira and Khalid were exceedingly busy here on the Sword Coast, that wasn't going to happen. And although he was just a glorified messenger, the man was senior enough to be able to dispose of that kind of funds as he saw fit.

"Good. We also have more information to pass on to Harpers about the conspiracy in general, its former associate here in Beregost and a possible connection to the church of Cyric."

The messenger had been in this business for quite a while and did not openly react to that, not until he had his mug in front of his mouth anyway. At which point, he allowed his snarl of anger to appear for a brief moment. "Tell me."

Jaheira did so, making no mention of Viconia or the agreements they had reached with the locals here in Beregost. That was not her tale to tell, and frankly, despite the impact it had on the party as a whole and Harry in particular, Viconia being a drow really didn't matter in the great scheme of things. The fact that there might be two priests of Cyric out there raising undead did, as well as the connection between that and the fact they'd run into several other priests of Cyric before this. It was clear that if the church of Cyric was not the driving force behind the conspiracy, the so-called Iron Throne, then it was at least a part of it.

That name had startled the messenger when it was first mentioned, but like any good listener, he waited until Jaheira had spun her tale before beginning his own. "There, I have some information for you. The name 'Iron Throne' is known to me, even if the heraldry you describe is not. The Iron Throne is the name of a major merchant house in Baldur's Gate, one of the three largest in point of fact. It has reach, power, and authority there and throughout the world to make many a king weep in envy. If it is in any way part of this conspiracy, you will have to tread very, very lightly," the messenger warned. "The merchant houses of Baldur's Gate play the game of thrones for keeps."

“S, s, so perhaps this crowned iron h, h, head is... Is a symbol perhaps for the darker s, s, side of this merchant house,” Khalid mused from the other side of the table, his voice barely carrying to the messenger.

“Possibly. But again, tread very lightly and do not even think to let such supposition see the light of day until you have concrete evidence to put in front of the authorities of Baldur’s Gate. Even then, you might wish to wait until you have the backing of at least one of the other three greater houses. Such accusations leveled against the Iron Throne from outsiders may still mean war. Baldur’s Gate would sooner see the Sword Coast burn than turn on their own without very, **very** good cause. Such as hurting their own bottom lines.”

The messenger snorted. “Trust me, I was an urchin on those streets forty years ago and have served the Harpers by following the trade routes of the queen of the Sword Coast all over the place. I know what I am talking about.”

Jaheira and Khalid both nodded subtly, and Jaheira imparted a bit more information from what they discovered in Tranzig’s mansion. With that done, she commented about how many bandits and others seem to be operating in the area around here.

“I knew that already. I ran into a band of bandits myself coming down from the Friendly Am Inn. Luckily, they could not detect me once I used my Hide in Shadows skill, or else I would’ve been in for a fight. It might be good that you and your band have decided you need to take time to train and level up over the winter. With Nashkel cleared and the trade of iron slowly picking back up despite the efforts of the conspirators and talks still ongoing between Amn and Baldur’s Gate, the conspirators might decide to be a little more heavy-handed. Beregost might be a small town, but it is at a very necessary junction between the trade routes that ply the Sword Coast,” the messenger warned.

Jaheira nodded, understanding the point but hoping the man was wrong. *After how often we have all come close to dying since reaching the Friendly Arm Inn, I think a nice, leisurely winter would serve us all best. To say nothing of the various ways we have discovered to help with Stats and abilities. Khalid and I might not get anything out of that, but even so, the rest could use all the help they could get.*

Their business concluded, the man gestured with his almost empty mug to the barmaid for a refill as Jaheira and Khalid were almost finished with their wine. “Well, I am not certain that your report will make the higher-ups happy, but they will at least be pleased that you are still making progress. And I personally have to say that I am happy you are alive, Jaheira. Given the last report from Rebecca of Nashkel passed on we all thought you lost.”

Khalid tried hard not to react to that name, but his twitch caught his wife’s eye, and she looked over at him, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Young Rebecca?”

“One of our agents in Nashkel,” the messenger answered blithely. “At first, she thought that Khalid was approaching her to have her pass on information to the Harpers as a whole, that she had given her loyalty away somehow. But she realized quickly that he was horribly drunk when he began to flirt with her... equally badly.”

The man was about to chuckle when he seemed to realize that Jaheira was scowling, and he quickly apologized. He tried to cover for his fellow man, saying that Khalid had instantly stopped when one of their party had come over and mentioned Jaheira’s name, but the minor damage had already been done. Seeing the frosty glare on Jaheira’s face, the messenger beat a hasty retreat, heading towards the barmaid who was bringing him his beer, grabbing it off of her plate and heading up to his room.

This left Khalid to face his wife’s ire, but after a moment, Jaheira simply asked, “You did not go beyond flirting?”

“N, No. I did not. Even in my drunk-addled g, g, grief over your possible passing, which I t, t, thought at the time more than likely, I had m, m, more self-control than that,” Khalid stated earnestly. Although, from the recollections he had since regained of that time, Khalid knew he had come down disastrously close to going further. Only Branwen and Minsc pulling him away had stopped it from happening.

He kept that thought to himself obviously, and after a few moments of searching his face, Jaheira nodded. This was not the first time that Khalid had flirted while drunk with a human woman even on this journey, and she had long known his fascination with buxom human women. It was much the same as she had towards human men, but she had never gone beyond simply looking.

Jaheira also knew that their wondering eyes were part of their shared Elven heritage. While it was more unusual among half-elves like the two of them, elven relationships occasionally simply lasted so long that the lustful side of things fell away entirely. The couple would still very much love one another but not see the point of expressing that love physically any longer. And she and Khalid had been together for more than a hundred years by this point. Looking and even the occasional flirting while Khalid was deep into his cups she could put up with. So long as, when called on it, Khalid did not try to cover up or lie about it.

She nodded now and then leaned forward, taking one of her husband’s hands in hers. Jaheira’s other hand was busy underneath the table, and Khalid suddenly winced as it reached its destination and squeezed hard. “No drinking for a month, or else. Understood?”

“GLEEP, er, y, y, yes, my love,” Khalid answered instantly, and the pressure released, becoming a faint touch rather than a grip of steel.

“Good. Now, let us go and join the others. And when we return from our present mission, perhaps the two of us can get a room at the Inn instead of staying with everyone else at the house.”

At those words, Khalid blinked. The meaning of her words hit him a second later, and Khalid smiled almost boyishly for a second before hopping to his feet and nodding, pulling Jaheira to her own. The two of them then left the tavern and paused outside, leaning against the building below the window with the fluttering purple cloth. A moment later, the window opened slightly, and a small scroll with a stone to weigh it down dropped into their waiting hands. With the promissory note in hand, the pair headed off to meet their fellows.

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The side quest (medium) **Protect the Soultaker Dagger** has been updated.

Jaheira and Khalid have resumed contact with the larger Harper Hall. They have received payment ahead of the dagger’s destruction, but you must still protect it until the one charged with it’s destruction arrives. What that entails you cannot know. But given the soul of ***** within it might be more than you can handle...

Reward: 10,000 Gold (received).

Further good will from the Harpers.

The main quest, **Iron Intake Issue**, has been updated. Members Jaheira and Khalid have discovered a clue!

The Iron Throne, the name on Lamalha’s lips and in Tranzig’s notes, is the name of a legitimate merchant house based in Baldur’s Gate. It is certainly rich enough to pay for all of the bandits, assassins, saboteurs and mercenaries you have fought since leaving Candlekeep. However, it is a business first and foremost, so why would it try to stir up war between Baldur’s Gate and Amn? What would they have to gain? There might be profit in war, but enough to make the dangers worth it?

Further, the Iron Throne is one of the most powerful mercantile companies in Baldur’s Gate, a mover and shaker in local and regional politics. If they are behind the iron Intake Issue and the rest of the trouble occurring along the Sword Coast, then pointing the finger at them is a danger in and of itself. Be very careful, lest you light the fuse to the war after so long spent removing fuel to that fire.

Blinking the pair of messages away, Harry mentally shrugged his shoulders, not being in any position to do anything about the second notification right now and very happy to see the

first. That would probably quadruple the party's available funds, which would come in handy soon. Instead, he continued to gaze over the desk at Vai, waiting for her to agree with Kelddath to let the party head further out and deal with this skeleton warrior problem.

Vai scowled, shaking her head. The meeting had started on a pleasant note, with Harry reporting the death of the three wyverns and Mellicamp the chicken. That had actually won a smile from the woman, who seemed amused by the ridiculousness of it all. But she was not pleased to learn that Kelddath had agreed that this threat of skeleton warriors was so large that Harry and his group should be allowed to venture further away to deal with it.

"I'm not happy about this. If I didn't think you would need all of your party, I would ask that you leave a few of your companions behind so I know you would return." She sneered a little at Harry. "Given the lengths you have gone to for that... woman... I can readily see that you are loyal to your companions at the very least." She then sighed, shaking her head. "Fine. Since this Cyric priest and his undead might become a danger to my town, it's better you deal with it out there than here. But seven days, not eight!"

Harry nodded at that, although he was internally wondering how exactly Vai would enforce that ruling. Kelddath had true power and a connection to the Morning Lord. Who, if Harry was not keeping up his side of the bargain, could probably allow Kelddath to no longer keep up his. Vai didn't. But he wasn't about to say that aloud, lest the gods be listening and prove him a fool. *Again.* "We will. And thanks for the trust."

Vai snorted and waved him out the door. "Just don't be late."

Harry quickly met up with the others at Feldepost's Inn, where he found Dynaheir and the others with her had already ordered food. The pair of thieves joined the rest of the party about halfway through the meal by Harry's reckoning, by which time Jaheira and Khalid had explained what they had learned from the messenger and what they had told him in turn. They even showed Harry the promissory note for ten thousand gold good for anywhere along the Sword Coast, which made Harry very happy indeed, thinking that it would be time for them all to tool up by the time they got back.

At the moment, even with that ten thousand gold and the rest they had on hand, they still couldn't buy much from the locals. Thanks to the agreement with Vai and Kelddath, their reputation with the local merchants meant that anything beyond simple supplies would cost them an arm and a leg. Harry knew they had to get their reputation back up to normal before even trying to buy anything, let alone the upgrades he wanted the party to get. The only exception would be the ankheg plate, but even there, Taerom had slowed work on it to the point it wasn't ready yet, something Imoen had thought to check in on with Alora just now.

Now, though, with Alora wearing a brand-new heavy cloak and Imoen stating they'd bought more fire starters and some flatbread for the trip, it was time to get going. Night came early at this time of year, and it was already pushing midafternoon.

Harry's decision to leave let them start on the journey, and with Jaheira and Minsc leading the way, they were actually able to continue through the night for a time. Well, that, and the number of people within the party who had Helms or Rings of Infravision or their own night vision like the two half-elves and Viconia. Those were a major help at night, as they had been in the darkness of the mines of Nashkel. The only one missing something like that was Alora, and she made a joke of it, repeatedly bumping into things and people until they stopped for the night.

The next morning dawned about as bright and clear as it got this time of year on the Sword Coast, with no hint of rain. Despite that, the party slowed their pace, with Jaheira occasionally returning to the rest of the party carrying this or that bit of a plant, wondering if Harry could recognize it as an alchemical ingredient. With her explaining what they all were, he had gathered around a dozen samples over the course of the day. The others got into it, and at around midafternoon, when Jaheira was starting to look around for a place to stop for the night, something amazing happened when she explained to Alora what the young gnome had found.

Alora has discovered an alchemical ingredient.

Although pure luck led her to the ingredient in question, she is now just a little bit wiser for having discovered it and listening to Jaheira's explanation of what it is.

+ 1/10 Wisdom.

"So we found another way to raise our wisdom score!" Imoen said, shaking her head with a laugh. "And unlike fish, it will have longer impact than just watching you fry our catch."

"Agreed. I think as we continue, we should still be on the lookout for things like this. In fact, Jaheira, why don't you stop looking for them? Let Alora, Imoen and the others do the searching, and you do the explaining."

Everyone agreed with this, even Edwin. Wisdom, like intelligence, directly impacted a magic user's ability with magic. The higher, the better. It was common knowledge that, for example, a higher wisdom score allowed you to cancel a spell instead of getting it interrupted if you were about to take a hit or lost your concentration for some other reason.

"Have I said how much I like your Advanced Adventuring System recently, Harry? Knowing that we are able to do something like this, to raise our stats like this watching them raise, that is a magnificent thing. Far better than doing so blindly." Viconia murmured. While her own wisdom was high at fifteen, more was always helpful. Seeing the others slowly gain a point

of wisdom throughout that day had her asking Minsc and Harry for help in strength exercises that night.

This led Harry to see something surprising. It appeared as if her acceptance of training in strength had created a very small personal quest much like when Harry had decided to follow Khalid's training regimen soon after they had met. He was very close to finishing that training regimen and hoped to be done with it before winter came, although he hadn't been as good about exercising every day with it as he should have been. Although Harry was somewhat bemused to realize that his AAS system still had quite a few quirks to it that he hadn't run into just yet. In this case, the name given to Viconia's personal quest had Imoen laughing so hard she tripped over a root and went sprawling while everyone else simply caught their heads staring in confusion between Imoen and Harry.

Viconia has accepted the personal quest, **Get Gud Scrub.**

Your party member, Viconia, wishes to build up her personal Strength as much as possible. She has no wish to be a bodybuilder or built along the same lines as your former traveling companion Branwen but wants to be strong enough to use plate mail rather than chain mail in a fight without being encumbered. Of course, building your strength is a game of diminishing returns, hence why someone else has to be in charge of training, and it is not a pure numbers game in terms of training exercises accomplished. Rather, it is about days finished following a prescribed regimen from Minsc and yourself.

For every five days that Viconia completes the training you and Minsc assigned to her, she will gain a point in Strength. Viconia can gain up to seven Strength in this manner without impacting her overall body type. Which would be a travesty.

"I feel as if I have been insulted and yet appreciated in turn," Viconia murmured after Harry read this aloud. "If I do not already know that you had very little to do with the wording of these notifications of yours, Harry of Candlekeep, I will be most annoyed at present. As it is, that would be like being annoyed at the weather because it is cold." *Although I am also pleased with that last bit. While I have known since we met that Harry appreciates my body, it is always nice to hear.*

Harry chuckled at that, and the trip continued for a third day.

During the third night out from Beregost, the group found themselves woken up at night. Thanks to Harry's map, the enemies weren't in a position yet to attack them, the warning of enemies being around waking them up before even the guard on duty was aware of the encroaching danger. This time, instead of being regular wolves or any other type of animal that Harry had already seen, these were dread wolves, which created a new bestiary page.

A new page has been added to your bestiary.

Dread Wolf.

Larger and stronger than normal wolves, these wolves were infected by necromantic energy, becoming larger and stronger than their normal cousins. They are also a little bit smarter than most normal wolves

Attitude Toward Adventurers: Undying enmity and hunger. Dread wolves have a hankering for all manner of living flesh that makes them a terror to fellow animals and sentients alike.

Strengths: Dread wolves come with the equivalent of hide armor, giving them resistance to striking damage. They have a 100% resistance to any cold damage, poison either by smell or natural means and a 50% resistance to electrical damage. Their teeth are far stronger than a normal wolf and have been known to bite through chain or even scale mail with some ease. Their gaze can also paralyze the weak-willed, and their howls are terrifying.

Dread Wolves also have a hatred, perhaps because of the necromantic energies within them, for any cleric or healer. Unless otherwise engaged, a Dread Wolf will always prioritize attacking the healers.

Weaknesses: like most undead, fire works. So does light, blunt force trauma as well as going for the eyes, ears and mouth. Unlike normal undead, Dread Wolves also have beastly instincts and can break or be fooled relatively easily.

By the time the dread wolves came close enough for Henry's identification ability to fill in the bestiary page, he had already spread out his people in a Concave Line formation, giving them the bonuses that came with that formation.

The five dread wolves came to the camp from one direction, and from her hiding place up on a large boulder sticking out of the forest, Jaheira began the party, hitting the wolves with Tangling Vines. The magical resistances the wolves had did not matter to that spell, and three of them were caught, leaving only two to charge forward, while Harry, Khalid, and Minsc rose from where they had been laying down, weapons raised, activating the bonus for the formation of +2 to their defensive skills and armor.

I wonder why we haven't seen the Killing Zone tactic popping up. Weird. But maybe because the terrain isn't clear of obstacles? Harry thought, even as he swung his short-shafted polearm forward. He had thought the extra distance it gave him would be helpful. And frankly, Harry quite liked how many ways the bec de corbin had of killing what it attacked.

A case in point occurred now as the Bec de Corbin's thin, stiletto-like point took one of the dread wolves straight through the eye as it charged. The dread wolf impaled itself on his

weapon, the momentum of the charge nearly pushing Harry off balance despite his strength. The creature's corpse slumped, threatening to drag Harry's arm out of position, but Harry let go, grabbing his long sword out of his Item Space and chopping at the other wolf as the tip of the Chelsea Crusher kept it at bay. It backed away rapidly, then charged at Harry, but Harry twisted around, and a flaming arrow struck it from the side as a fireball hit its fellows stuck in Jaheira's tangling vines spell, and Khalid sliced in from Minsc's other side. Between the three of them, Harry, Khalid and Minsc finished the dread wolf quickly, with Minsc going so far as to chop the dread wolf's head off as well as that of its fellow to make certain.

"You might have filled in a page in your bestiary friend Harry, but Minsc has run into dread wolves before! They are known to us in Rasheman, as they tend to appear around areas where we have fought off the armies of the Red Wizards. We will have to behead them all and then burn the bodies."

"Considering that Edwin's spell seems to have set two of the remaining dread wolves on fire to the point that they had forgotten the fight and were just desperately rolling in place, Harry was fully agreeable to this. Finishing off the last wolf was a bit of work, but soon, all of them were piled into a small pyre, which was quickly set alight. With Minsc's warnings, Harry didn't even try to harvest anything from them, fearing it would all be tainted somehow by the necromantic energies that had shifted the common wolf into these monsters. A decision that all of his party agreed with, bar Edwin and Viconia.

But Htier complaint about a wasted chance to make money did not matter to Harry. Not only over the past few days but also previously, the glaives, the gnoll ears, the bits of a wolf, and so forth, they didn't need to take a chance on these things. Not once were they able to buy at normal instead of marked up price. Harry pointed all this out as he ended the argument and nodded to Minsc to toss a few burning faggots onto the mass of dead dread wolves.

"Hmmpf, well, I suppose that might be the case. However, I do believe that I refuse to stay within smelling range of that pyre. We need to move on," Edwin grumbled, not having liked how Harry ignored his advice on this matter.

"True. Follow me, and I will lead us on," Jaheira stated simply.

Instead of splitting from the party, she and Minsc led the way in sight of the others thanks to the various Invraision giving items, and the group set a brisk pace through the night. Jaheira led the way there until she suddenly paused, hopping backward and staring down at where her feet had been about to be. "Hold!" She barked, both embarrassment and order in her tone, reaching out to stop Minsc from moving past her. Everyone did so behind her, and she knelt down very carefully, staring at a few twigs and pebbles.

To everyone else, it looked as if she was just staring at the ground. Even Alora was a bit confused, even as she wondered aloud if Jaheira had seen something there. But Khalid looked and then frowned a little. “I, I, is that Druid Sign?”

Jaheira nodded absentmindedly, moving a few leaves, then nodding slowly. “Yes. The marker for whoever left it here is missing, but everything else is clear once you move a few of the leaves that have fallen since it was laid out. I almost missed it, drat it!” Jaheira hissed to herself, shaking her head. “Khalid, if you could head forward between that oak and fern, straight ahead, you should find a resting area.”

Harry rested a hand on her shoulder, peering down at the sign as Khalid moved around them, heading into the campsite, peering around and nodding at everyone behind them. “You still saw it in time. Does it say anything about the skeleton warriors or the Shadow Druids?”

You have attempted to read **Druid Sign**. Designed by the druids for the druids, this sign is an insanely complex type of written language. There is no way to learn it save being taught by a druid, and even then, it takes years to master. Even with your Greater Observation skill, you cannot make anything out of it.

“Yes. There is the sign for dissension in the ranks.” Jaheira touched one dark-colored stone, although Helms of Infravision were not exactly the best when it came to colors. Certainly, it was darker and larger than the other stone that it had almost entirely covered. “The Shadow Druids are ascendant now... there is... there is the sign for blood being spilled within the circle. That is not good. And darkness deeper in, and magical... Something. That part of it is obscured as well. The location of the new druid circle, however, is also noted,” Jaheira stated.

“All of that from just a few pebbles and twigs?” Harry’s voice was wondering rather than sardonic or questioning, and Jaheira simply chuckled, pushing herself to her feet and smiling over at her husband, who had just returned from heading forward on her orders. He was smiling widely and beckoned the rest to follow him.

When they did, the party found that he had removed what looked like an extremely well-made wicker door to a large cave made out of the hollows left behind by two trees that had fallen in different directions. As they had fallen, the weight of the trees had both pulled their roots up out of the ground. The roots had then almost merged, creating a wooden cave with an awning of roots and hardpacked dirt. Someone had then come along and used nature magic to make certain that the hardened earth wouldn’t come apart under rain or snow. Once Minsc had a small fire going and the wicker door had been replaced behind them, it actually became quite cozy as well as well-hidden.

As they all settled down again to attempt to get some more sleep, Harry looked over at Jaheira. “You didn’t mention where the Shadow Druids have moved the circle.”

“It won’t matter to us for a long while, but it is somewhat strange,” Jaheira acknowledged, having been thinking about it as they settled into their new campsite, biting her lip worriedly. The Shadow Druids have decided to shift the circle to the Cloakwood Forest. I would’ve thought they simply would have retreated further east, deeper into the Forest of Sharp Teeth. Even with the marker for interlopers further eastward and the one acknowledging the darkness spreading under the eaves, that is somewhat suspicious: that they would decide to head to a rump forest, and one so much closer to Baldur’s Gate, I mean.”

Harry frowned for a moment, even as a new notification popped up.

The side quest (medium), **Shadow Under the Eaves**, has been updated.

The parameters have been changed due to information found by Jaheira. You now know that the battle between the normal druids and the Shadow Druids for control of the Sword Coast’s Druid Circle has been won by the Shadow Druids after some infighting. Further, the circle is no longer simply a threat to Beregost or even Nashkel but possibly has positioned itself to become a danger to Baldur’s Gate itself. Why and how is still a question, however.

To find the answers to those questions and to stop the threat the Shadow Druids might pose, you you will have to head to the Cloakwood Forest to further track the Shadow Druids down.

Reward: TBA

Even though the druids might have moved to the far smaller Cloakwood Forest, you still lack any information that could tell you how dangerous the circle is, and thus a specific reward cannot be calculated.

After reading that aloud, Harry hummed thoughtfully. “Where is the Cloakwood again... wait, isn’t that the place where there used to be an old iron mine or something that was shut down?”

Flicking through his quests, Harry found the mention of it, a post made back in the Friendly Arm Inn. As he flicked through the pages of his quest journal, Harry seemed to pause suddenly, staring at it. “We’ve only been on the road for two months!?”

“It is not how long it takes you to get somewhere but what you do on the way,” Dynaheir announced with a snicker.

Still somewhat in shock, Harry slowly shook his head, staring over at Imoen, who was looking back at him with just as much surprise. Then he rubbed his face with one hand and decided to move on. “You know what, I’m not even going there. Fine. Yes, Cloakwood Forest. There was a mine there that was mentioned when we were in the Friendly Arm Inn. A silver

mine that had been overrun by hobgoblins and others. Defeating them would give us a massive reward, or even control of the land itself and an income of 2,000 gold per week.”

That earned some shocked looks, but Harry shrugged. “We can’t do anything about it, and since the quest was a large side quest, you can bet that it will also be very difficult. Still, if nothing immediate comes up, maybe we can head there after this business in Beregost is finished.”

“And we have taken the time to upgrade our stats and equipment,” Jaheira reminded him.

“Truly! By the time spring comes around, I wish to be as strong and as physically fit as I possibly can be,” Viconia said fervently. Left unsaid was that she might well be unable to join them if they went to Cloakwood Forest, it being so close to Baldur’s Gate. But she did not say anything, nor did the others, not knowing the geography of that area. Not even Jaheira and Khalid, who had traveled through Baldur’s Gate down to the Friendly Arm Inn and then from there to where they met up with Harry and Imoen, knew much about where the Cloakwood Forest was and if portions of it were patrolled by the Flaming Fists or not. “But we also wanted to investigate Durlag’s Tower, did we not?”

“We did, but I get the impression that quest will be exceedingly hard. I think we should put it off until we have grown in strength a good deal more than we have already,” Harry opined.

After a full and quite pleasant rest, the group quickly moved on after Viconia’s exercise finished the next morning, still heading north and northeast as Kelddath had told them to in order to reach the Red Canyons. Later that day, they were attacked by a group of hobgoblins, but similar to the dread wolves, Harry had seen them coming, cutting across the group’s path from the east, bypassing Jaheira and Minsc. He had the rest of the party ready in an ambush point, and the fight was finished by the time Jaheira and Minsc returned. There were only five hobgoblins, and they had gone down easily enough despite the fact that they were surprisingly well-equipped.

“Three out of the four have chest plates, and two of them have shields. That’s not normal for hobgoblins, is it?” Harry asked, looking around at the others. “The others we’ve run into only had leather armor or gambesons.”

“No, it is not. Is there anything to tell that these hobgoblins are part of the Chill? Those mercenaries would be able to acquire such equipment if they decided to,” Jaheira pointed out.

“Nothing. These are just bandits,” Harry mused, shaking his head as he stared down the bodies.

“Regardless, hunting them down is not what we are out here to do. Recall that we are under something of a time crunch, Harry,” Edwin warned.

Harry nodded, noting that his notice of the bandits being so well-equipped hadn’t actually given him any kind of quest or anything, either. *Maybe it was just a minor random event?*

Leaving that strangeness behind, the group started forward, noticing as the sun was high in the sky that the forest was starting to thin out ahead of them. The ground became much harder and less fertile, and it looked as if the forest was coming to an end. Harry knew that was a bit false, though. The Red Canyon area was just a hole in the greater Wood of Sharp Teeth. According to Kelddath, it had been created by some old magical battle that had happened in this area.

Soon, they left the forest entirely behind for a time. Ahead of him, Harry could see why the area was called Red Canyons. At the far edge of his site, several large buttes rose from the ground, and a series of fissures appeared to the west of them, heading east, then north. The very land seemed blasted and cracked by some ancient impact. And all of it, butte and canyon side was made of red stone.

“Alright, everybody, I think it’s time for us to change our marching orders a bit. Imoen, join Minsc and Jaheira. Spread out ahead of us at three different angles. The rest of us will follow slowly. Don’t engage anything. Just find what we’re here for and shift back to us.”

The three scouts nodded, and the group moved on, looking almost like a trident made out of dots on Harry’s map, spearing toward their goal. As Imoen and the others raced off, Harry turned to Edwin and Dynaheir, talking strategy for a few moments. Harry meant to use every advantage his Advanced Adventuring System could give him in the fight to come, fearing that this would be another Mulvaney incident, and this time, with more spell slingers on the other side.

In a way, he was right. No sooner had the trio of scouts reached the outer edge of the canyons when all three and Harry saw a warning pop up in their gaze, one that they hadn’t seen for a while.

You have entered an Enemy Zone.

Warning: enemies will spawn within the zone at specific points.

Seeing that, the scouts came back to consult, and for a time, the group headed forward together. Soon, they ran into their first Skelton Warriors. A patrol of four, two warriors and two archers came around the bend in the gorge they were currently in. Though the group was dealt with quickly, it wasn’t the only group Harry could see on his map. Although the map couldn’t fill

in any details about the maze of canyons and crags that they were moving through until Harry saw it, he could still tell where there were enemies, the red dots appearing as if they were in a blank area outside the mapped out area of the map.

Two more fights followed, but then Imoen hit on the idea of climbing up and moving along the ground above the canyons. With ropes and her spells, they might be able to move up there between areas not covered by the patrols of skeleton warriors. "After all, the more of them we kill, the more our quarry might know we're in the area. The last thing we want to do is get bogged down in a never-ending fight as we try to push into the canyons."

This idea won over Harry, and after a moment, the group was moving forward again. Imoen went forward away from the others, using her Hide In Shadows skill and keeping her spells in reserve. She and Harry had experimented with their Blood Magic up to this point, and she had become much better at the visualization aspect of it, so she could make herself invisible at need with only a -15 hit to her health. In contrast, Alora took over from Jaheira. The druid's Forest Meld had begun to fail the moment they started to enter the canyons, there being not enough trees or growing things to let her use it.

Alora and Minsc stayed close, moving to the front of the rest of the group, with Alora also using her Detect Traps skill just in case. Imoen, in contrast, was first levitated by Harry up onto the top of the cliffs above and then made her way along from there. But she returned as night fell, and the group fell back almost out of the Red Canyons, forting up in a small cul-de-sac for the night. The next day they had to fight still more patrols, while Imoen broke off from the others and ranged ahead of them.

Near midmorning Imoen paused, ducking down just in case her hide in shadows failed as she moved forward slowly, then crawled, casting an invisibility spell on herself as she moved. *Although, honestly, I don't even know if they should be called spells any longer. Not only do they come from the blood of this Murder-hobo fathered bodies of ours, but there's no incantation or hand movement either.*

Shaking that thought off and simply being grateful Harry had discovered the trick to that, Imoen crawled forward towards the lip of the crevice from which she had heard voices a moment before raised in some kind of argument.

Soon, she was staring down into a small ravine that quickly opened up into a tiny valley, although the term really didn't do it much justice. When Imoen thought of the term valley, she imagined a lot of green in a small area. Here, there was no green, just like in the rest of the Red Canyons.

And what was below instead of green, growing things did not make her very happy at all. First of all, twelve skeleton warriors were moving around this sliver of the greater maze of

canyons in patrols of three. Seven other skeleton warriors were standing beside two fellows who sat on either side of the fire.

One, whose features were hidden by a hood, seemed to be rather annoyed and cold if Imoen was judging his body language correctly. She couldn't make out anything about him, not armor, not weapons, only his body language.

Across from him was a large, powerfully built man, seemingly of the same overall build as Hary, whereas the man in the cloak more resembled Khalid. He didn't have a helmet on and had short-cropped orange hair, a hammer in one hand, and a kite shield on his other. He seemed to be waving the hammer over the fire at the other man, but despite the anger of the motion, his voice did not reach where Imoen was hiding.

All of that would've been one thing. Even if the man in the hood was a wizard, and in Imoen's opinion, he for sure looked the part, then the skeleton warriors would have been a threat certainly, but not a major one. No, it was the run-down tower behind them that annoyed her.

That, and the sight of two animals that she had never seen before lying out behind the wizard man with three dread wolves around them. The two unknowns were large, low-slung creatures of light green and yellow, and for some reason, the very sight of them caused Imoen to back away so much she could barely look over the edge. She didn't know why, but she obeyed that instinct.

But even those two animals paled into insignificance in terms of the danger of the tower behind them because it was a spawning point. Just like the many dungeon hearts they had dealt with in the gnoll fortress, the Nashkel mines, and before that, with the kobolds, this meant that a continual stream of reinforcements would start coming out of the spawning point the instant they attacked.

Unfortunately, Imoen couldn't tell much about that spawn point. That was until she watched as two skeleton warriors trooped out. They joined three of the others and began to make their way out of the valley, heading elsewhere into the maze of canyons in a larger patrol than the ones the party had dealt with.

Figuring she had seen enough, Imoen backed away, keeping her invisibility charm up until she was well out of sight. At that point, she switched to Hide in Shadows and, using a point me spell, hurried back to her friends.

Having seen that she had stopped, as well as the red of enemies nearby, Harry and the others had shifted in that direction.

"Describe the area around that tower again? What's at the back of that valley?"

“More skeletons, I’m assuming. I saw about twelve of them on the other side of that tower as I was leaving, although some of them seemed to be trooping away, Harry,” Imoen answered. “The canyon’s a real canyon, open at both ends instead of being a dead end.”

“Describe these creatures of you that you saw,” Jaheira ordered once Imoen finished her report. After Imoen described them, she exchanged glances with Khalid and Edwin, who both scowled. “Basilisks.” She looked over at Viconia. “The two of us will need to provide everyone with spells of protection from petrification.”

That was enough for Harry’s bestiary to create a new page.

Lesser Basilisk

A strange, magical creature whose methods of reproduction are beyond obscure, basilisks are deadly eight-legged monsters whose eyes can turn anything fleshy who look into them to stone and whose bite is among the most poisonous in the world. Although powerful, their legs are too low-slung to be of much use in a battle. Not that they need them.

Attitude Toward Adventurers: Apathy. Given their ability to turn anything they look at to stone, Lesser Basilisks do not really understand the concept of danger, so they could not care less if they see an Adventurer or an animal. Amusingly they don’t actually eat their victims. After all, how could they eat stone? But that surely won’t matter to anyone once they become a statue.

Strengths: The gaze of the Lesser Basilisk is deadly to anyone not protected against it by either natural immunity or spell. The bite of a basilisk is also poisonous, and they are strong enough to headbutt an ogre down to size. Given their lack of natural predators, basilisks do not feel fear.

Weaknesses: Basilisks do not have any natural resistance to any kind of magic, even the mental kind of bar spells supposed to create fear in them. They can be mentally dominated, so long as the process isn’t interrupted by the spell user meeting the creature’s eyes. Their hearing is also not the best, nor is their smelling. Ambushes are the way to go against these creatures.

Reading all this aloud, Harry sighed, slapping a hand to his forehead, even as a wild plan to deal with the creatures occurred to him. *That will depend on how useful their legs are for anything but moving around, but Imoen and I might be able to deal with them relatively easily.* “Still, what is it about crazy people wanting dangerous pets?” he demanded aloud.

“You have already answered your own question,” Viconia, Dyanaheir and Jaheira said as one before glancing at one another in some surprise.

“Then always believe that in proving they have conquered something big and dangerous, they are showing their power,” Dynaheir went on.

Snorting at that, Harry frowned a bit. "I need to head forward to figure out how best to attack them. I need to look at the terrain to start using it against them." He looked up at the evening above them, shaking his head. "And I don't think that we are going to attack tonight. That seems a stupid idea to me even with our Infravision assistin items."

"Doubly so, considering that Jaheira and I will need to replace some of our existing spells with spells of protection from petrification," Viconia reminded him. "We don't have those in our spell repertoire normally."

With Minsc and Alora leading the way, the party skirted around the first canyon that would lead them in the direction of the tower and the mage and the cleric. Instead, they began to go around the area there, finding a cul-de-sac in the canyons with only one entrance. Imoen and Alora put out traps, the gnomish lass showing a propensity for them that exceeded Imoen's by a bit. All of the spell slingers were shifted deeper into the area, with Khalid and Minsc bedding down directly in the entryway into the cul-de-sac. Once everyone else was in a protected position, Harry and Imoen then climbed up onto the escarpment above and made their way over the broken ground up there until Imoen had led them to the ravine, looking down at the tower and the two individuals below. Surprisingly, both of them had already bedded down for the night, the remains of some kind of meal laid out between them.

At first, Harry avoided looking at them, instead looking at the territory around them and the spawning point. His Observation skill couldn't tell how quickly skeleton warriors would spawn, but he did learn a bit more about what he was facing.

You have encountered a claimed spawning point. By calling upon Cyric, the evil cleric Bassilius has gained control of the spawning point within the remnants of an old defensive tower. The only intact portion of the ancient Ulcaster Academy, which once stood here is now a spawn point for the very undead that helped invade the school thousands of years ago.

To dissipate or destroy the spawn point, you will need to kill Bassilius and then control the area directly around the tower for two hours. If you lose control of it for longer than a minute, that time will reset.

After a few moments, Harry felt he had memorized the area well enough, and a few plans were already percolating. With that, he turned to the two men below, observing them as he whispered into Imoen's ear what his Greater Observation was telling him. Just because they were covered by a spell that Imoen had jokingly called the Cone of Silence was no excuse to make any noises.

Name: Bassilus

Class: level 14 priest of Cyric.

Race: Human

Gender: Male

If insanity is a sign of power among the priesthood of Cyric, Bassilus would be thought of as very powerful indeed. He is completely off his rocker. He believes that the skeletons around him are his dead family, killed in some ancient assault on his ancestral home. Bassilus is actually a trained commander and fighter of some repute. He is also much more powerful than Mulahey or Lamalha, but his madness can be a detriment.

Warning: Bassilius will be able to control the skeleton warriors of the spawning point he has bound himself to. Until he is dead, you cannot start the destruction of the spawning point.

While worried about the high level the other man had, Harry had seen up to this point that a level advantage could only carry you so far. *If we can surprise him...* Shaking his head, Harry turned his attention to the second man, who, to his mild surprise, did not turn out to be a second priest of Cyric as rumors had suggested. The second man was also a man, and a wizard, proving Imoen's predictions on both those points quite accurate. His race though had both the watcher's jaws dropping.

Name: Baeloth Barrityl

Class: level 12 Sorcerer

Race: Drow

Gender: Male

An exile for a bit of trouble with his last show, Baeloth was a renowned pit fight organizer and menagerie huckster. Calling himself one of the best sorcerers in all the realms, he left the Underdark fleeing the anger of a powerful family. For all his bluster, Baeloth 'the Entertainer' is a very experienced sorcerer and combatant.

As a beast master, all of the creatures Baeloth has trained will obey him without question. None will be susceptible to mental assaults, morale deficiencies or loud noises or smells. Baeloth's will will bind them until pain, either his or theirs, overrides that training.

"He's a drow?" Imoen hissed. "That's weird."

Harry shrugged his shoulders, gesturing her back down and away from the edge of the canyon. Knowing what they were up against and the territory, he had a plan. "I suppose so. But that doesn't make him any less of a target. Come on, let's get back to the others."

The next day, the group split up according to Harry's plan. Harry had told everyone about the plan the day before, and after more than a bit of argument, particularly from Minsc, Dynaheir and Khalid, his ideas had won the day. Fighting their way through so many skeleton warriors and two mid-ranked fighters wasn't going to be easy. They had to use the terrain to their best advantage.

That was why Harry, Minsc, Imoen and Khalid helped Viconia, Jaheira and the two magic users to climb up to the top of the escarpment above before Khalid joined them. Once that was done, Minsc, Imoen, Alora, and Harry made their way there through the canyons.

The group of four made their way through the canyons, hiding from one patrol of Skeleton Warriors and fighting another before they turned the corner into the single canyon where the old tower was. As they did, they once more began to hear the clicking of bones in the clanking of armor. Unfortunately, there was no place to hide in this stretch of the gorge, and Harry instantly ordered them to pull back. "We need to make certain Basilus and the mage don't hear any noise and send more of the undead out to investigate.

"We're coming up on time," Imoen warned. "Those Protection from Petrification spells you were both hit with won't last much longer."

"Then hopefully, Jaheira or Viconia will remember that and hit us with more when the fight begins," Harry said grimly.

A second later, two skeleton warriors came around the bend, then two skeleton crossbowmen, moving down the canyon in a prepared patrol just like the other groups of skeletons the group had fought before this. They instantly spotted the four adventurers and rushed to attack. The two crossbowmen paused where they were, instantly bringing up their bows, but Minsc got his shot off first, hitting one of them and doing admittedly little damage. Then Harry was charging forward, the bec de corbin in hand. He figured that the longer reach would more than offset the damage to his speed, and considering that all of the skeleton warriors they had seen so far were armed with long pikes, he needed that added range. That, and the bec de corbin had a hammer end, which was far better when fighting skeleton warriors.

The hammer segment of the bec de corbin smacked into the shaft of one of the pikes, shattering the weapon, and then Harry was through, stabbing with the bec's spearhead.

Of course, these were skeleton warriors. Stabbing really wasn't the best way to deal with them. Thankfully, the bec de corbin's tip didn't cut caught between the skeleton warrior's ribs, and Harry was able to duck under a strike from the other warrior. Meanwhile, Alora and Imoen had disappeared into Hide In Shadows.

This meant that the two skeleton crossbowmen and the two skeleton warriors all targeted Minsc and Harry, but that was fine. Over the past few days, Harry and Imoen had both spent time repairing the equipment they had gathered, which included the full plate mail they had taken from the one exceedingly tough warrior they had fought in Tranzig's mansion, which Harry was wearing now. Minsc was also wearing his Chest Plate+1, plus the shield necklace and armor-giving gloves given to him by Imoen and Dynaheir, who had been wearing them before this.

Harry's chest plate took a strike from one of the pikes, doing only a -1 to his health thanks to the armor, which he noticed only vaguely as he brought the bec de corbin's hammer around into the side of one of the skeleton warriors helmets. The helmet dented, and the skull beneath cracked, sending the warrior stumbling. Then Minsc was there. His Chelsey Crusher moved even slower than Harry's strikes with the bec, but skeleton warriors weren't smart enough to try and dodge, and none had shields they had seen yet.

Minsc's blow flung that skeleton warrior back into both of the crossbowmen, tangling up his legs with one of them and causing the other's shot to go wide. Meanwhile, Harry disarmed the remaining warrior, the bec's beak finishing the job of cutting the undead warrior's pike in half. Then he flowed into a strike from on high, crashing the hammer down into the already dented helmet protecting the skeleton warrior's skull. One more blow finished it off, by which time Minsc had already finished off the two tangled undead.

Harry leaped forward, blocking a crossbow bolt that would've taken Khalid in the side with his shield, then Imoen and Alora were there, stabbing. Short sword and short sword +1 caught the crossbow-using skeleton, finishing it off quickly thanks to Backstab damage.

"Good job, but fade again as soon as you can," Harry ordered, giving Imoen a grin to take any sting from his words and exchanging a low five (high five for her) with Alora. "Overconfidence is a thing, as we against Tranzig, and I am very much looking forward to using someone else's overconfidence against them.

"True. And might I say, Harry, that I truly love how far out of your way you go to make certain we are on the other side of ambushes?" Imoen grinned back at Harry, and a second later, she and Alora disappeared once More into Hide In Shadows. Thanks to the three-story-high walls of the gorges around here, there were a lot of shadows for the technique to play with.

A second later, the green dots of Imoen and Alora moved behind Harry and Minsc, and Harry looked at Minsc. "Well, big guy? Ready to play bait for goodness?"

“Minsc believes that does not sound heroic enough, but bringing the boot of goodness against the butt of evil is always a good thing, regardless of how it is done,” Minsc answered, giving Harry a big thumbs up.

Without further ado, the paladin and the barbarian ranger moved around the canyon entrance, striding forward towards the skeleton warriors, the priest of Cyric, and the drow wizard waiting for them.

The moment they entered the gorge with the small camp and the tower, Basilus turned to them, and instantly, Harry understood that his observation skill had been downplaying things the night before. This man was not only mad, he was just straight-out insane. He stared at them, his eyes wide, unseeing, a manic smile on his face that put Harry in mind of some kind of horror flick that the Dursleys had attempted to watch once about an ax murderer.

It hadn't gone well. All of them had been freaked out. It was one of the few times Dudley, who had suggested the flick because he wanted to prove to his friend that it wasn't scary, did not get his way.

The man's voice even sounded a bit like the Zhentarim members they had fought in Nashkel, high pitched, almost but not quite whiny, more like nails on a chalkboard. “Look, we have guests, brother Thurm.”

The wizard had already been looking in their direction, probably having heard the small skirmish a moment ago. Now seeing just two attackers, the man smirked under his hood, raising his hands and theatrically throwing back his hood, then shaking his hair out and smirking at them, a wild, fey look on his face, not crazy, but overly confident and theatrical, which was not something that Harry would ever have thought to see on the face of a drow after interacting with Viconia.

The drow bowed grandly from the waist, gesturing around him to the two basilisks, the three dread wolves, and the large grizzly bear on his side of the fire, adding to the flamboyant appearance he was trying to give off. “Greetings, travelers! I don't suppose you have shown up here to join my latest venture, have you? I've been having the devil of a time trying to get Basilus here to join in. His skeleton horde would not only be perfect to draw a crowd as disposable enemies for my beasts to fight but excellent workers around the place.”

“And I keep telling you, my family and I have other things to do. Don't we, brother Thurm?” Basilus spoke to a skeleton standing nearby.

This warrior had armor on, which marked him out as different from most of the other skeletons, but not all of them. In comparison to the other three skeletons that Harry could see

milling about behind the man who also had armor, there was nothing to differentiate this one from his fellows.

Basilus's voice went on, becoming almost hyper for a moment, "Yes indeed, yes indeed. Soon, the small forays will end, and we will start sending out larger groups, then larger and still **larger**! Yes, our home, our home here, it will **spread**!" Abruptly turning back to the skeleton he'd spoken to before, Basilus' voice went back to his simply normal level of madness, absurdly as if the sight of this random skeleton calmed him down. "Tell him brother Thurm, tell them of how it was in the old days."

The skeleton shifted, its jaws opening and closing, making a rattling noise, which Basilus took to be some kind of answer, and he chortled, waving a hand airily. "Come now, don't hesitate on my account! Some of these guests might not have heard your tales before."

Again, the skeleton simply rattled its jaws, and Basilus sighed, wagging a finger at the skeleton warrior as if it was a recalcitrant child. "Hold your peace then, though I remember a time when you would sooner die than be quiet... You would..."

For just a moment, Harry saw some lucidity returned to Basilus's eyes, his body slumping a little, his shield hand rising up to run through his hair. It didn't last though, and he turned his eyes on the newcomers. "Well, I suppose I can wait until you feel like telling your tales yourself. I don't remember the old days so well. The new days take all of my attention. My God demands **so much** these days! Demands **destruction**! And we will give it to him, won't we brother Thurm?"

All of this had Harry mentally on the back foot. He wasn't used to enemies monologuing at him. Not even Tranzig or Mulahey had done that. Ranting and raving at him for a little bit, yes, but not entire paragraphs, and certainly not in the semi-friendly, outgoing manner the wizard had attempted a moment ago. Mind you, his speech gave the same kind of feeling of a spider welcoming a fly into its web, an analogy that came quite easily to Harry considering his discussions with Viconia about Lolth and the Underdark, but still. *The only real comparison I can give is Quirrell and Voldemort in my past life. Ugh.*

He shook his head, deciding that the man's background or why he had become crazy or turned to Cyric just did not matter. Nor did how a drow wizard had come to the surface. In fact, he really didn't want to bandy words for it with either of them.

But since they had addressed him, some strange part of Harry decided that he had to speak to them at least for a few moments. *Besides, it will give Imoen and Alora time to get around us and into position on the right flank.* Since he was watching the twosome do just that on his map, that thought was probably the one uppermost in his mind. Probably.

“Basilus, priest of Cyric, you have been sending your skeleton warriors further and further afield, and they are starting to encroach on territory near Beregost. Further, as a representative of the church of Cyric, you are wanted for questioning on the current iron shortage.” Harry switched his gaze over to the wizard, staring at Baeloth thoughtfully. “As for you, there is no law on the sword coast that stops you from gathering deadly creatures or anything like that. So long as you leave now and take your creatures with you and do not bring them into Beregost, Nashkel or any other settlement, we won’t have a problem.”

Charisma Check Failed.

Your attempt to talk Baeloth into leaving has not worked, as he truly does not think you and your companion is any threat to him. You seem to have taken your appearance of weakness a bit too far.

The drow wizard’s lips twitched, seeming almost to become a genuine smile for a moment before his eyes narrowed as he took in Harry’s features under his helmet. Since Harry was wearing a helmet with a T-shaped opening, there wasn’t much of Harry’s expression to see, but evidently, it was enough. “While that was actually perhaps the most welcoming response I’ve been given in a long while, thanks to my race, I am afraid I cannot agree. You seem to have stepped into something of a lion’s den, youngster. You are young Harry of Candlekeep, are you not? While I am not fully allied with the Priesthood of Cyric or any other power of this land, it has come to my attention that you are a most wanted man.”

Baeloth lifted a gloved hand to his face, tapping his chin, of course, theatrically. The drow wizard seemed to do everything with flair.

“I wonder, will I still get the money if I simply capture you and keep you as a pit fighter? I do not doubt that a Bhaalson fighting against my creatures would be a magnificent draw!”

With that, the wizard began to chant, and Harry knew that the time for talk was over. *Thank whatever gods are listening for that! Honestly, bantering words with your enemy? It served a purpose, but still!*

Without further ado, Harry and Khalid charged while Basilus simply cackled, and the skeleton warriors around him, who had been held in place by his will for a few moments, did the same. “Kill them, kill them and add them to our family, Brother Thrum!”

However, Harry had no intention of simply charging into the mass of them. Instead, he made certain that the two of them raced forward to a point where a boulder stuck out from the side of the canyon, narrowing it down just a little bit more than the entryway into this portion of the canyons. Just enough for two people to fight abreast, something he had seen the night before as he came up with this plan. There, they halted, and Harry pointed forward with his

shield hand. Not towards the attacking skeletons or even the priest or wizard, but rather towards the left flank of this canyon. "Boom!"

The hit to his health of -15 was still nothing pleasant. But once more, the discussion he'd had with Viconia and the bits of training he and Imoen did with visualization worked, and Harry ignored the message that accompanied the use of his Blood Magic spell.

From his hand streaked a spell that was something like the Reducto spell that Imoen had taught him, yet instead of simply exploding as it hit the side of the canyon, it shattered the rock in a specific way, causing a small landslide, which enveloped three of the dread wolves on that side of the canyon.

Baeloth was too far away from the canyon wall, and his own spell flashed out from the man and slammed into Harry. Oddly enough the spell almost looked like a stupefy spell, only the spell was not a wide cone of red color, but instead a thin slice of red, the forward edge of it looking almost like a rune written out in red.

Baeloth has used Power Word: Stun.

When this spell hits its target, any creature is stunned for the duration of the spell. That duration depends on the Willpower of the target, and the level of the caster.

Due to your High Willpower and Gamer's Mind, you are able to shake this spell off from a level 14 wizard with ease.

It was a tossup which event caused Baeloth the most shock. The sight of a fully armor-clad individual like Harry using spells, something that **no** magic user would be able to do, or Harry simply shrugging off his own spell. "Fascinating! I truly must have you for my battle pits!"

The first of the skeleton warriors reached Khalid and Harry at that point, as the wizard prepared another spell, this time a defensive one, Globe of Invulnerability. Harry had seen a version of that before, although this one was the sixth-level version.

Even as the first skeleton warriors reached them, Harry had to grin at that. *Scared the ass, I see! He's worried about what kind of spells I could send his way. Good.* That kept the beast tamer from ordering his remaining monsters into the fight, including the basilisks.

Basilus, on the other hand, had not forgotten he was a leader, and now he shouted orders which the skeleton warriors obeyed instantly. The skeleton crossbowmen, of which there were seven, spread out, with some of them even starting to climb up the rubble caused by Harry's spell before it had finished settling. One of them lost his foot to a moving rock, dumping it down into one of its fellows, taking down two for the price of one. Although both of them were still, technically speaking, alive and, also technically, in the fight.

The other skeleton crossbowmen took aim over the heads of their fellows or through them, firing at the two invaders. Harry hunkered down behind his shield as Minsc hastily ducked back around the boulder to his right for a second. Then, as a healing spell hit Harry from on high, Minsc jumped back out and roared, bringing the Chelsea Crusher around at waist height, battering the first group of skeleton warriors who had reached them back into their fellows.

The next second, a Protection from Petrification spell hit Minsc, and Harry gestured another image flashing out of his mind to superimpose itself on the physical world. "WALL!"

The transfiguration spell hit the ground in front of the pair, and although the word Harry had used was simple, the construct wasn't quite as simple as the wall Harry had used back on the wild cats when he and Viconia first talked about the possibilities of his Blood Magic. Instead of a single tall stone wall, the spell created a two-level berm, with one layer facing them, acting like a makeshift fighting step on a castle's wall. The other segment, the wall itself, was a three feet tall wall, fit to defend the warrior's lower bodies.

Minsc and Harry took a single step forward up onto the fighting step, and then as the skeleton warriors attacked once more, batted those strikes aside with shield or shaft, smashing forward. Thanks to their own polearm-like weapons and the added height, any range advantage that the skeleton warriors had with their pikes was completely negated. The next second, Harry's bec de corbin smashed into the face of one of the skeleton warriors, crumpling its skull as the Chelsea Crusher cut straight through one of the attacking skeleton warriors, sending both halves of it to the ground. "Buttkicking for Goodness!"

Then they were back to thrusting against several others, shielding and thrusting at the same time. A few hits got through on Harry's armor as he was prioritizing protecting Minsc, but that was fine by him. *I wish the big guy could have agreed to wear the armor, but he didn't so I have to do what I can.*

The wizard had just finished his Globe of Invulnerability and was about to go on the attack again when a sling stone embedded itself into the ground by his foot. Having missed the two spells that had hit Harry and Minsc, he stared at it, then looked up to the ravine just in time to see an acid arrow coming his way from the other side of the ravine. The spell struck and did nothing, but Baeloth traced it back to where it came from and shouted, "They are above us on the left!"

"Ah, the new family members seem to want to make this interesting then!" Basilus answered. "Crossbowmen, aim at the left side of the gorge. Reinforcements to the front."

The skeletons obeyed, but the height of the ravine's walls was against them. The skeleton archers could barely see the shadows of their targets, let alone those targets

themselves. And Baeloth was wrong, the rest of Harry's party wasn't just on the left of the gorge.

On the other side of the canyon, the avalanche had stabilized quickly. After all, the canyons were only around three stories deep. As it did, Khalid charged down the unstable rockslide, shield and sword in hand. Such a charge down such broken terrain would have been impossible or simply slow for any human, but thanks to the dexterity of being half-elven, Khalid was able to do it.

Above, Jaheira watched her husband charge down from the opposite side of the ravine with a scowl on her face. She had just attempted a sling stone shot simply because she wanted to wait until after Dynaheir's fireball hit before casting her own spell into the tumbled below and had been most displeased to miss. *I will not miss again, curse it!*

As she thought that, Dynaheir's fireball struck the center of the roiling mass of undead. It slew a few right off the bat, shattering their bodies. A few others, those who wore bits of cloth, found themselves on fire.

Basilus was thrown off his feet but rolled, pulling out a fire that had started on his gambeson, barking out orders as he got to his feet. Even now, he was doing a much better job than Baeloth when it came to acting as a commander. "Brother Thurm, take three of our fellows and deal with that sword user! I will send you reinforcements from the tower. All of our frontline warriors already engaged with the first two attackers keep on them. Crossbowmen, all of you fire up at the new invaders! Kill the mages!"

The mad priest of Cyric seemed to pause then, a putrid yellow and somehow diseased green color appearing around him. It flowed up into his throat and then disappeared as he shouted, although for all the light show, to Harry's ears, his voice didn't sound any louder than before. "Brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, servants and guards, we are beset! Come to my aid!"

As the beak of the bec de corbin stabbed into and through the side of a skeleton warrior's helmet and took the skeleton warrior's head clean off, Harry saw the notification that he had been hoping for. Well, he saw that one, and a far less welcome one a moment later.

You have successfully used the tactic: **Staggered Ambush.**

Bringing in your forces into a battle in a controlled manner from different directions you have pulled the enemy's attention every which way. While you will gain no defensive or offensive advantages as your forces are too few and too scattered, your enemy's physical and mental abilities will be hampered.

Effect:

- Minus 60% attack accuracy.
- Plus 60% chance to break.

Note: because the majority of your enemies in this battle are undead, they will not suffer any morale penalties. Rather, their ability to coordinate with one another will be slightly reduced despite the fact that your enemy has attempted to counteract your ambush through organization.

Beyond that welcome notification, the unwelcome one read:

Basilus has used **Commanding Tone**.

As the individual who has raised some of the skeletons you are currently facing and who has bound himself to the spawn point within the tower, Basilus can command the forces of this spawn point. He has done so.

All other skeletons within the red canyons have heard his command and will be moving in your general direction. Skeleton warriors currently engaged with you and your party will gain plus 10% to attack and defense.

Time remaining before the first reinforcements arrive: fifteen minutes. Since you killed two of the nearby patrols, you gained some time before the first group returns.

That didn't sound good at all to Harry, and on his map, he could see two clumps of four red daggers each at the outset of his map, one of which shifted into four dots in seconds. The nature of the canyons would help them a bit, as would the shambling nature of the skeleton warriors' general speed. But even so, the timer clicked down, and Harry knew they would need to end this fight before he and Minsc, at least, found themselves surrounded.

Worse, the spawn point activated as well, either on a timer of its own or at Basilus' command. Out of it came five more skeleton warriors, one after another.

They ate a fireball that destroyed two and sent the other three reeling, Edwin having changed his target at the last moment. This was followed by a tingling vine spell shot into the center of the horde of undead. The vines burst out, tangling up several of them, but most of the crossbowmen had already obeyed Basilus's command and were firing up at the ridge line above. Their shots weren't doing much, the edge of the ridge helping to defend the other segments of Harry's ambush. But it was still a worrisome sign.

A second later, two ogres were summoned into being at the foot of the ridge where Edwin, Dynaheir and Jaheira were.

At that point, Baeloth, who had been backing away from Khalid, felt he had put enough skeleton warriors between the warrior who had already finished his pet bear off and was even

now moving to attack his basilisk. At that sight, Baeloth slapped himself on the forehead. "Blast it, Baeloth. Remember you are not in this fight as alone as you were when you fled the Underdark."

With the bear and two of his dread wolves having been crushed by the avalanche, this left the two basilisks and a single dread wolf. Yet he was certain the two basilisks would win this battle on their own. "Attack! Basilisks, use your gaze on them all!"

The two basilisks had been lying down, almost like they were sleeping despite the battle around them. At Baeloth's command, they instantly opened their eyes, rising from where they had been laying down on the ground, turning their eyes in the direction of the two warriors at the entrance to the gorge.

As the so-called allies between them and the two warriors were all undead, it didn't matter if any of the warriors had been turned around so much in the fight that they met the gaze of either of the basilisks. It would have no effect on the undead.

But a second later, Baeloth's snarl of delight faded, and he cursed as the eyes of his favorite animals did nothing to the two warriors. "Curse them! They planned this well. But will it save your fellows? Turn your eyes upwards, my creatures!"

"Cut!" Imoen suddenly shouted, revealing herself near the tower and ducking back down out of sight. Two skeleton warriors turned in her direction but could not see her before she disappeared into Hide IN shadows again. Meanwhile, Alora had begun to creep around the tower, placing down traps as she went.

Under Imoen's direction, a thin beam of magical energy, almost as thin and as long as the bec de corbin's beak, sliced across the creature's eyes, blinding it. This sent the lizard into a frenzy just as the last dread wolf charged forwards. One of the basilisk's many back paws caught the side of the dread wolf, nearly taking one of its own legs clean off. The dread wolf howled then twisted around and tried to bite the basilisk in turn.

Unlike the undead, animals were very easy to confuse or redirect once they were injured. Although the monsters would still obey Baeloth, their instincts were stronger.

Another fireball spell slammed down and then magic missiles struck, sending Basilus reeling. A moment later, a Call Lightning blast slammed down into Baeloth just as his Orb of Invulnerability faded.

Both of them staggered, although Baeloth was more staggered than injured. Like all drow, he had a natural 50% resistance to magic of all sorts.

Harry ducked under a blow from a skeleton warrior, returning a strike with his weapon that stove in the creature's chest, slowing it and sending it stumbling into his fellows. *Good, my request to Jaheira and Viconia go nearly 2 to 3 offensive/defensive seems to be working. Healing spells for when we are expecting trouble, attack spells for when we have the advantage of surprise on our side,* Harry noted, realizing that was probably an oversimplification even as he did, but feeling that it might be a good idea going forward. *Or maybe have Jaheira concentrate on healing, Viconia a little bit on healing, and a lot of offense?*

To one side of the ravine, the two ogres howled and snarled, smashing their clubs down into undead, shattering them, or hurling them back into their fellows, breaking the crossbowmen's line on one side. They drew several of the skeleton warriors armed with claymores or pikes to them, but their natural size and the reach of the ogre's clubs gave Edwin's conjured creatures an advantage.

Across from them, Khalid fought on his own on the other side of the ravine for a few more moments, then a pair of summoned-up wolves reached him, darting to either side to attack the skeleton warriors pressing close. He had taken several hits to his armored form, but the skeleton warriors needed a truly powerful swing in order to even dent his armor, let alone get through and do some real damage thanks to the full plate mail he wore and his sword magically enhancing his defense by +4. And skeleton warriors were not nearly as strong as gnolls, nor as smart as humans, able to aim at his joints.

Better, the skeleton warriors having to deal with attacks on their flanks had pulled a lot of the pressure from Harry and Minsc. Soon, more undead began to fall to blades, hammers, or pikes.

Hissing, Baeloth pushed herself to her feet, eyeing the oncoming Khalid and the wolves with him warily. While they were not nearly as big a threat as the attackers from on high, they were more threats to him personally. "Over here, my pet! Freeze these four!"

All three of the wolves fell, turned to stone. Their forms were soon shattered by the skeleton warriors. But Khalid had also been hit by a Protection From Petrification spell, and he ignored it, falling back a bit at the sudden surge from the skeleton warriors no longer being engaged by the wolves.

High above, his wife did not. Another call lightning spell came down, striking the basilisk, while an acid arrow and magic missiles spell hit Basilus. The two wizards had now switched entirely from area-of-effect spells to single-target spells, although the choice of a single target rather than two showed their teamwork still needed work. They should have hit both the main targets instead of doubling down on one.

Viconia finished healing Harry, and now moved down the shattered wall of the canyon to join Khalid, grimacing a little as she did so slowly. This had nothing to do with the broken terrain underneath. While she didn't have as much Dexterity as even the cursed Khalid, yet drow were still elves, and her footwork was masterful. No, rather, she was somewhat encumbered by the heavy chain mail she wore.

Even as she internally cursed her weakness, Viconia moved forward, shouting out, "Now?"

"Wait for it!" Harry shouted in turn as he and Minsc kept their position. *Basilus needs to die before we can break out our final trump card.* Then, suddenly, Imoen and Alora rejoined the fight. Alora's traps were now interrupting the reinforcements coming out of the tower, and both of them had gotten in close to the two primary enemies once Edwin and Dynaheir switched away from AOE spells.

One of the first things Harry's observation skills had told him about Alora was that she might be very deadly as a backstabber. She had proven this several times already, which was why Harry had asked Imoen to pass Alora her short sword +1.

Now, Alora came out of her Hide in Shadows precisely behind Basilus, who had just finished healing himself from the double magical strike a moment ago. His armor in tatters, his shield riddled by the magic missiles and preparing his own attack spell, Basilus was caught completely unawares. Alora's backstab struck, and Harry grinned as he saw the notifications.

Alora has achieved backstab.

Basilus is Crippled. Alora's stabbing attack clipped his spine.

As Alora pulled her blade back and shouted, "Sorry, redheaded crazy man, but you're really no fun hanging out with all these skeletons, you know?" Basilus slumped to the ground. His legs and arms were no longer obeying his commands, even as he shouted and shrieked orders to his skeleton warriors to try and turn and defend him.

They obeyed, and Alora backed away quickly, ducking under several blows but not quite quickly enough to get away entirely unscathed. Two strikes took her down into the yellow, but by then, she was rolling underneath one of the two ogres legs, and Imoen struck the next second.

Having seen Baeloth use a spell that protected against normal weapons, Imoen knew that any attempt she made to backstab him would fail. Instead, she reached out with a hand, slamming it into the man and sending a cutting spell straight into his skin.

Even so, it didn't do nearly as much damage as it should've been. At that range, a human or Elven warrior with no armor and at that level might well have lost more than half of his health points and been crippled from a strike to his back like that.

Instead, the magical spell almost acted like a physical strike, hurling Basilus off of his feet. But he rolled quickly, coming up, showing a long gash across his back, but not a deep one, as he twisted around, glaring angrily at Imoen, who smiled cheerily. "What, the show not going the way you think it should?"

"Blast you, leave the quips to me! I am the ringmaster here!" Baeloth shouted, readying a magic missile spell.

But Imoen activated Fight like a Jackrabbit, and only three of the missiles hit. She stumbled but was still able to evade a blow from the last basilisk's tail, closing her eyes as she did so.

Nearby, a series of magic missiles struck Basilus, snuffing out his life. At the same time, Edwin cast his own spell towards the basilisk, finishing the beast off with a well-placed fire arrow.

Grimacing, Baeloth began an attack spells even as more skeletons charged out of the spawning pit. Two of them fell, tripping another, but the two remaining moved to attack Imoen, who backed away towards Alora and the two ogres. Both of them were still on their feet, sliced about quite a bit but still smashing at the surrounding undead.

Behind him, the second basilisk finally succumbed to its wounds, while the first finished off the dread wolf and then began to simply slash out or lash out with its tail and all its legs at everything around it. Even now, it didn't panic and break, but even so, it did more damage to the skeleton warriors than the nearby Khalid could. Several of the skeleton warriors turned on it, hacking and slashing at it with their pikes.

But with Basilus dead, the cohesion that the skeleton warriors had gained against the ambush faded. Harry could tell instantly. Fewer strikes were getting home on his or Minsc's armor, and Harry grinned, watching as Basilus hopped away from a slingstone shot from on high, his clothing ragged, his own spell having instantly canceled out as he was forced to evade. "Now!"

As one, he and Viconia howled, "Turn Undead!"

Fleshing out from both of them, Turn Undead, an active aura-based technique that clerics and paladins could use against undead, encompassed the entire party, shared between them thanks to Harry's party skill.

The effect on the battlefield was immediate. Without Basilus's own aura to counteract it, seven of the skeleton warriors and three of the skeleton crossbowmen fell.

This instantly allowed Khalid to charge forward just as Baeloth finished his own chain lightning spell. "Blast and bother you all!"

The spell lashed out towards Khalid, who hissed in agony as the strike hit, shaving off at least twenty-five points of health, causing his shield to become so hot he had to toss it aside. The Chain Lightning then bounced from Khalid to Viconia, Minsc and Harry, hitting all four of them for different levels of pain. Viconia stumbled to her knees at the base of the rockslide, but, while Minsc roared in rage, and hopped over the wall, taking the fight to the skeleton warriors.

Harry followed. With the active aura now causing the skeleton warriors to move even more slowly, the fight had turned entirely against the undead and the drow wizard. Now, it was time to finish them off before the first reinforcements arrived.

Backing away from Khalid, Baeloth had lost track of where he was on the battlefield. Now, from between the two ogres, Alora charged forward, trying to achieve a second backstab.

The wizard turned hastily, bringing up his staff, but that in turn opened him up to a strike from Imoen, who had been dancing in among a few of the skeleton archers, using them and her Fight Like a Jackrabbit skill to dodge the blows from the pikes and claymores of the other undead.

Now, Imoen dodged around a strike from one of the skeleton warriors, and her sword lashed out, catching him on the shoulder. It did no real harm, but it did distract him, allowing Alora to attack in turn.

And the little gnome did not strike his body. Rather, she struck his hand, hacking into his wrist with her sword. The +1 weapon bit deep, causing Baeloth to cry out in pain and drop his staff.

Then Viconia was there, smashing a skeleton off its feet with her hammer she lunged from her knees towards Baeloth. Baeloth had only a second for his eyes to widen at seeing another drow before she shouted, "For Shar! Down with Lolth and all who worship her!" Her hammer came around, slamming into his face, and Baeloth was flung backward, face and skull shattered, dead before his body hit the ground.

You have conquered the area around the Spawning Point.

To make certain that the magic within dissipates, you must control that area for two turns of the glass. All the while the spawning point will routinely spawn more skeleton warriors, and the other warriors in the area will try to take it back from your cold, dead corpse.

The countdown begins now:

2:00

1:59:59

Pushing aside any feelings of elation at the victory, Harry quickly began to give out orders. “We have incoming troops, and we have to hold the spawning point to truly win this fight. Edwin, order your ogres over to the tower. Viconia, take position there too.”

Harry looked around, then at his map, judging at about a minute before at least eight more skeleton warriors came at them from the other side of the canyon that he and Minsc had entered it from. “Jaheira, hit me with another healing spell in a second, then you and our magic users get down here! Khalid, you Jaheira and Edwin are going to have to hold the other side of the canyon. Alora, Imoen, get up onto the ravine as best you can and start laying some traps out. The skeleton warriors are coming home from every direction, above and through the maze itself. Dynaheir, with me.”

Everyone grimaced at that, knowing that the fight wasn’t yet over until they could walk away, something that Minsc put into words as he turned to retake his position on the berm, with Harry stepping up to slap him on the shoulder, taking his own position beside the larger man. “If the fight was easy, they wouldn’t need us to come all the way out here to fight them like this, Minsc. Viconia, call me back if you need me to join you and use my Turn Undead skill.”

Viconia grunted acknowledgment, already dealing with two skeleton warriors armed with claymores that had just left the respawn point. One of them fell quickly to the blows of the ogres, but the other ducked around them somehow, its blade lashing out and cutting into the arm of one of the ogres along a wound that had already been there, causing it to cry out in pain and stumbled backward. Viconia then darted forward, her shield up and smacking the next strike up over her head, her hammer coming into the side and taking the creature out of the knee.

Jaheira used her druidic abilities to create a series of hanging vines, which she and the two magic users, with a lot of grunting and huffing, climbed down. Alora and Imoen then split off. Alora found herself in the air thanks to a levitation spell, her “Whoopee!” making several of them laugh despite the battle they’d just finished and the ongoing danger before she landed on the escarpment above.

The little gnome would have taken too long to climb up the vines, which were already beginning to turn brown.

Then Imoen turned, racing up the avalanche zone that Khalid and Viconia had charged down. Above, the pair quickly began to lay out traps in half circles around the canyon, shouting out suggestions to one another as they worked.

As they were doing this, the first of the skeleton warriors to answer the recall order arrived. This group was dealt with easily, but soon on its heels more arrived from both sides of the canyon containing the tower. From one side came four, facing Jaheira Khalid and Edwin. A single magic missile spell took one down, and then the other three hurled themselves at Khalid and Jaheira on the top of the berm that Harry had just raised.

It wasn't as well formed as the first one, as Harry had been in something of a rush. However, it was enough to give Jaheira protection as her staff stabbed out like a spear, slamming into the forehead of one of the skeleton warriors and shattering it, while Khalid lashed out with his sword at the pike of the second skeleton warrior, cutting it in half with a single blow just behind the head.

It fell back and ate another magic missile spell from Edwin, who reported that was the last of his magic missile spells. He still had a few other attack spells, though. Moments later, when skeleton warriors nearly knocked Khalid backward with a shove from its pike, he darted forward, using blazing hands on the creature and the next one behind it. The cone of fire caught both, turning bone to ash.

That was but the start. Above, nine skeleton warriors attempted to close with the canyon and the beleaguered Tower, running straight into the traps that Imoen had laid out. None of those traps were debilitating enough against the undead to put them down permanently, but they slowed them, letting the defenders below deal with the next group of attackers. Then Minsc and Khalid split off from their defensive points, first using bow and arrow to kill the skeletons on Alora's side, then rushing up the rocks to join the Imoen up top on hers. With Imoen pulling back and using arrow and spell fire, something that Imoen would pay for in health, the two warriors were able to close with the already battered group of undead. A Cleave from Minsc's Claymore took one down instantly, and a shield bash from Khalid slammed into two others, knocking them off of the top of the ravine down into another gully below.

Then they were pulling back, finished with that group and racing back to their defensive zone. Instead, Harry ordered Dynaheir and Edwin to join Imoen. From that side of the ravine, they shot spells, slingstones and arrows, the attackers coming from Alora's side, the side where Jaheira, Dynaheir and Edwin had started the initial battle.

The next two hours went **slowly**, with skeleton warriors attacking them intermittently, but although by the time the last hour ended, everyone was exhausted and a little battered around the edges, none of them took any serious injuries thanks to Harry's planning, his map

being able to tell him where the attacks would come from, and the special abilities he and Imoen brought to the table. Those and the Turn Undead technique quickly proved decisive against the horde of undead.

If the undead had been able to think for themselves, to bunch up and attack in waves instead of attacking in dribs and drabs, that would've been a decidedly different matter. Even Turn Undead wouldn't have mattered against the sheer weight of numbers. But they didn't. And the defensive position Harry had hastily created first to surround the spawning point Baeloth and Basilus, and then to defend that area from outside worked extremely well.

As Harry counted down the last twenty seconds, Viconia watched in amused amazement as the darkness within the tower suddenly disappeared with a pop. "It is done."

Congratulations!

You have successfully defeated the skeleton warrior Spawning Point in the Tower of Earth. A tower once devoted to housing the strongest of Enchanters and Conjurers for the Ulcaster School of Magic, it had long been corrupted by the aura of necromantic energy the undead warriors who had initially attacked the school had created around the site of this area, where the wizards and teachers had attempted to fight the attackers.

It was then turned to Basilus's purpose, his God binding his will and living energy to the point, as Mulahey had before him. If left unchecked, Basilus would well have become a danger to all trade and everyone, indeed living in the area between Baldur's Gate and Nashkel.

On top of the experience points you have earned from actually defeating Basilus and his strange companion, your party has earned **6,000 EXP.**

In Harry's line of sight, this message was quickly followed by another.

Congratulations, you have completed a full campaign!

Although small, this series of short, sharp battles constitutes a true campaign.

You were in control of the engagements from start to finish, a magnificent feat for a young leader. You have earned **+2000 Leadership experience** points for enacting a successful campaign.

You came through a campaign without anyone dying. **+600 leadership experience.**

You successfully created and used a new tactic, **Staggered Assault. +200 Experience.**

Harry's eyes widened at that, staring, then flipping to the Leadership and Tactics pages in his Character sheet. Staring at it, he clicked his fingers in annoyance at how close he was to leveling up his leadership skill again. *5422/6000 to the next level, drat it!*

After a second, he decided not to bitch about it. In reality, he knew that this fight had been pretty... Not easy, but well within their abilities. If I didn't have Viconia in our party, and if she and I didn't have Turn Undead, it would've been a different matter. If he and Imoen didn't have blood magic abilities, it would've been a different matter. With those though, what would've been incredibly difficult became simply hard and exhausting. And he was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"We won!" Minsc bellowed, raising the Chelsea crusher above his head and swinging wildly in the light. "The warriors of my lodge back home in Rasheman would get as drunk as skunks on the tail of our glory this day, for we have surely put the boot of justness into the backside of evil good and hard!"

Harry chuckled at that, turning and giving a smile and a wink to Dynaheir, who had joined them at that entrance to the gulley again. "Truly. Now, let's gather up the spoils. But before that, Viconia, where do you want to spend your level-up points?"

When they had first exchanged oaths to keep one another's secrets, Viconia had been a Limited Party member. As such, Harry had been able to see her stats, but he wouldn't have been able to do anything about any stats she earned while leveling up. What they had been doing at the time would have controlled that. But since then, he had passed the threshold of interest and respect needed to make her a full party member. It had happened after the whole being judged by the gods thing, which honestly was something of a no-brainer given what Harry had needed to dare to help Viconia.

Yet at the time, Harry hadn't really cared about it much, dealing with too many other things. Since then, the two of them had talked about it, and Viconia had taken to this change eagerly.

Now Viconia smiled, pulling off her chain mail, leaving her in just her gambeson she then pulled off her helmet, twitching her head this way and that, letting her wild white hair flow freely. "Is that even a question, Harry?"

For just a second, Harry stared at it and at her. The adrenaline of the fight had yet to leave his body entirely, and the sight of Viconia's gorgeous face had him thinking of ways to celebrate that was no way allowed in polite company. "I would like my level-up points to go to strength if you please."

Harry nodded, pulling up her stat screen even as he asked everyone else to gather together near the tower. Alora was already shifting over to loot the bodies of Baeloth and Basilus, leaving collecting the undead gear to Harry and his resource-gathering skill. Everyone looked exhausted, but Harry supposed that was to be expected, and he politely asked Jaheira

and Khalid to set up a small fire. They wouldn't stay in the area long, but he felt that everyone deserved a warm meal before they started their return trek.

With that done, he gestured Viconia over to him and led the way around the boulder that had been so important to the first defensive position he and Minsc had taken. The wall there had been breached and knocked down in several places, letting them through easily, and soon they were out of sight. "I know you don't want everyone to know all your stats and everything, so I figured that we could do this out here."

Viconia smiled at that and even gave Harry a quick kiss in thanks for his thoughtfulness, a surprisingly gentle gesture from her. "Thank you for that, Harry. But if you could get on with it now? I am most eager to remove my weaknesses."

Name: Viconia DeVir

Gender: Female (Still duh)

Health: 80/80

Race: Drow

Class: Level 8 Cleric

Strength: 6

Willpower: 12 (+5)

Dexterity: 19

Constitution: 10

Durability: 4

Wisdom: 16

Charisma: 14

Intelligence: 14

Luck: 5

While Viconia was still thinking about her basic stats, Harry had moved on to read a few of the other things on Viconia's stat sheet. Not all of her skills or abilities, though, as he knew

those were tied to her past, and although he knew a lot of her past, there were some things she had not shared yet.

“Okay, so it looks as if you get half a point added to dexterity or wisdom randomly with every level. That’s almost like half-elves. They get a quarter randomly. Your wisdom went up a point just now because of that. You’ve got two more stat points to use and one weapon competency point for getting to level 8. Thinking about it and looking at your stats again, I’d recommend that you split your stat points between Durability and Strength to help both along. With the exercises we’ve already got you doing, that would be the best way to help both those stats along.”

Grimacing, Viconia snarled, hissing to herself in her own language for several moments at her weakness, during which Jaheira and Khalid shouted over that they were done making the small fireplace, and Alora exulted in finding several shinnies and a thousand gold on Basilus so far. On top of that, she had found a symbol that “Makes me want to either run away or crumple it up into a ball and throw it in a river and two things that need to be identified because they’re magical. And I’m not touching them.”

“She shows much wisdom. As would we if we ate and left quickly,” Edwin bellowed his hint with all the subtlety of a warhammer to the face.

Viconia snarled at this interruption but stopped cursing. “All right, we will go with your plan, Harry. One point in Durability, one point in Strength. As for my weapons proficiencies, I wish I could double up. But as a cleric...”

Harry quickly obeyed her requests with these stat points, shifting to the weapons page, and attempted to do that very thing. It didn’t work. Apparently, clerics could only get so good with any weapon. That, much like the restrictions on types of weapons clerics, like druids, could use, annoyed Harry. Yet there was nothing he could do about it just yet. *Perhaps if my advanced adventuring system evolves or I get stronger, then maybe?* For now, he stated, “You could gain a point in proficiency in flails or darts. Darts might be a good idea, frankly. Give you another long-range weapon. Sorry.”

“I will go with that suggestion. And do not apologize, Harry. This is a restriction that I have long known and labored under.” Viconia smiled at Harry then, as Harry absentmindedly finished the level of process, a bright, almost merry grin on her face rather than her normal sultry smirks or faint smiles. “And thank you, Harry. Gaining strength like this is something that I will never take for granted.”

Harry nodded, and then Viconia darted forward, grabbing his ears with both hands and pulling him into a kiss. Her tongue instantly plunged into his mouth, and she nearly **devoured**

his lips for a few seconds. Before Harry could properly reply she pulled back, stepping around the rock and heading back to the others without a word.

Harry remained there, somewhat stunned for a few seconds, before shaking it off and following after her. *Traveling with Viconia is never going to be boring.*

"I'm sorry you had to deal the final blow to that wizard guy, I hoped that I'd be able to do it," Alora said as Harry joined the rest of them, moving through them to the fire where he began to pull out his cooking utensils.

Viconia cocked her head, the faint sensual smile on her face that she had been wearing a moment before from having ambushed Harry disappearing as she looked at the young gnome. "Whatever are you talking about, Alora?"

"Well, I mean, that wizard guy, he's the same species as you are right? I've only ever fought other gnomes a few times, and only once did I have to kill one, and it made me feel really, really **icky** afterward. Even if he was an asshole who tried to slip something into my drink and followed me up to my room."

Everyone there understood with the fellow gnome had intended, although Edwin's suddenly angry look and the way he clenched his hands together surprised Dynaheir and a few of the others. Not Harry, though. For some reason, Edwin and Alora simply clicked, and it was fascinating to watch.

Viconia simply nodded her head at the story, indicating without words that she approved of the fact the man had died but that she also had no qualms with having killed the wizard. "Understand, Alora. The stories you have heard most of your life about my folk, they are almost all true. Most of my race is unrepentantly evil and corrupt. Indeed, I am certainly not on the side of the Triad," she stated, speaking of the three gods of light that formed the center of the Pantheon for good across Toril. "Your concern is... appreciated... but misplaced. Indeed, in the main, I would very much sooner kill another drow than practically anyone else except a high elf."

Both Khalid and Jaheira stiffened at that, but Harry ignored it, figuring that was, like the automatic hatred towards the drow, more racial than personal. How could it be otherwise when Viconia had never been to the surface before her exile?

"Tell me what else you found on the bodies," he ordered as he put the final touches to a series of sandwiches. The meat had already been prepared and waiting, all that he had to do was slice the bread and smear on some condiments in the form of a special dipping sauce he created on the spot, heating the sandwiches to a certain degree.

Yet even so, the sandwiches were remarkably tasty and disappeared quickly as Alora, speaking through a full mouth, explained what she had found on the wizard. Baeloth had previously had four thousand gold to go with the thousand she found on Basilus, a stone that needed to be identified, and a pair of boots that also needed to be identified. "The stone's weird feels heavier than it looks and has these yellow marks through it."

Harry gestured, and the four items that needed to be identified were laid out in front of him a second later. As the others finished their meals, he reached down, touching each of them, using his greater observation to enhance his identification skill as he had done several times before.

"The stone is a... Ioun Stone? I've never heard that term before. Apparently, it gives +1 to your armor, making your armor and ability to withstand strikes better. Interesting. The boots are called the senses of the cat. They give plus five chance to evade long-range attacks."

"I would recommend that one of the wizards game those," Jaheira stated. "As they are predominantly long-range fighters, being able to dodge while also still casting spells might be a major help."

"And since Edwin not only has magical robes but that belt he's investigating, I think they should go to you, Dynaheir," Harry agreed, looking over at the witch. Edwin grumbled a bit, but not overmuch. He'd already gained several different items, and what little annoyance he had dissipated as Harry tossed him the stone, which he placed in his pocket.

"The gloves are cursed. Gloves of Misplacement? Weird. We'll sell them at the earliest opportunity," Harry continued before pausing and staring at the hammer, then from the hammer to Viconia and back again. "The hammer is called Ashideena. And it's magically enchanted to do plus two more damage, and then electrical damage on top of that."

Everyone's eyes widened at that. That made that weapon one of their best finds since Jaheira and Khalid met with Harry and Imoen in the first place. The only two that came close were the longsword and the armor they had taken from the gnoll fortress, which had been turned into so much slag during the fight against the ankhegs. Harry used the longsword +1 + ???, the one that was missing a pommel stone and what might apparently be something greater than it seemed at the moment, although everyone had noticed his growing preference for the bec de corbin.

Debating for a few moments, Harry looked at Viconia. "A part of me is saying I should keep this. But I already have a magical weapon, and my bec de corbin gives me greater range than this hammer... and I am so happy that Basilus couldn't get into close range with any of us. That would have hurt a lot. But are you actually going to use it? Or would you prefer to be a mid-range fighter, relying on spells, sling and now dart?"

“I can do both, to a certain extent, as we spoke about mere moments ago,” Viconia siad, starting thoughtful and ending in a snarky tone as she looked as if she was about to spit to the side. “However, considering that I will follow your commands in battle, I suppose it depends more on where you see me and my abilities doing the party the most good.”

Harry sighed but decided to put that decision off for a bit. Honestly, he didn’t think that Viconia had either the armor or the Durability really to fight on the front lines, but he would wait until they saw if she could handle the Ankheg plate mail. As it was, she could barely wear plate mail over her gambeson and had been encumbered during the battle here with it, her shield, helmet and hammer. Having someone else with a magical weapon who could do that much damage might be very useful against certain enemies, though. *And she is already training to get stronger, too.*

He said so loud, and Viconia and the rest of them agreed. With that done, and with all of the items identified and two of them given out, Harry took the holy symbol from a disgusted-looking Alora and stoved it in his Item Box before moving over to the nearest skeleton warrior. Within seconds, all of the weapons the skeleton warriors had been using, mace, claymore, pike, and their armored helmets and armor, were all in his Complex Item Box. They wouldn’t make much money, but together, well, if each helmet sold for a single piece of gold, there were over a hundred here. Similarly, the pikes would sell for seven gold each, and there were seventy of those on top of the forty-plus he had taken from the gnolls after their meeting with Drizzt. Lastly, the claymores would go for a little over twenty gold.

All in all, it would quite nicely add their overall money once they could actually sell them to the merchants in Beregost, which would let them tool up to a tremendous degree. Something Harry was very, very happy about.

OOOOOOO

By the time the sun was starting to set, the group had left the Red Canyons behind, and were within sight of the forest. They pushed on until they reached the edge of it that night, bedding down in the best place Jaheira could find them, although, for the first time, Harry made certain that there were two guards on watch at all times instead of the normal one and his own map ability.

Thankfully, they weren’t attacked in the night, and the next day, they were off again. Nothing of much import happened until three days later when a certain conversation happened as Viconia dropped back from where she had been speaking to Harry as Harry moved to the side to harvest something that Alora had just spotted.

It didn’t turn out to be anything, just wild garlic. But harvesting a dozen of the wild garlic bulbs at one time still added to their cooking stores quite nicely.

Meanwhile, Viconia suddenly found herself between Dynaheir and Imoen. She cocked an eyebrow, looking over at the younger human girl. "I thought you had already approached me about my growing closeness with Harry, Imoen. What is this about?"

"Look, I don't have a problem with your species or as a woman. I'm just looking out for someone who I see as a brother," Imoen began.

"He is actually your Half-brother, you know. Through the God of Murder and... apparently, fornication judging by how many half-siblings you have out there," Viconia drawled.

This earned her a pebble thrown at her head, a response that had Viconia chortling until Jaheira spoke up from behind, causing Viconia to turn around and look at her in surprise. Jaheira had asked for only Minsc to be sent forward that day, complaining of a stomachache. That had been enough to send Khalid almost running for the hills and Harry breaking out a sweet, honey-infused confection for the woman, something that made her feel a little guilty. Although to be fair, her monthly grizzly was due to show up in a week or so, which might ruin her plans for her husband when they returned to Beregost.

Yet right now, Jaheira set those issues aside, looking at Viconia closely. "I have few enough friends in this world, and I tend to treasure those I do have. I have no issue with your flirting or getting into a physical relationship with one another. Indeed, I rather think it is good for him."

And for you, Jaheira added mentally but did not say aloud. She wasn't certain how Viconia would take hearing that, from Jaheira's perspective, it seemed as if Viconia had mellowed greatly since that moment they had first met when Jaheira had woken up carried on Harry's back. "However, I just want to make certain. You are still planning to leave before we reach Baldur's Gate, correct?"

"Within sight of the walls is the furthest I will go. The Flaming Fist officers in Beregost might not have my description, but those in Baldur's Gate itself will undoubtedly have such, and there is a limit to how much Imoen's color charm can do. No, given how many wizards, priests and clerics are within a major city like Baldur's Gate, any attempt on my part to move among its people will simply cause issues for me and any companion of mine." Viconia shook her head firmly. "No, I will not enter Baldur's Gate."

"Then your relationship, whatever form that takes with Harry, is finite. It cannot be a deep one. And I am not certain if Harry is as good at protecting his heart as he is at protecting his mind and body. I simply wish to make certain that no danger from that quarter will come from you willingly," Jaheira stated.

Viconia slowly nodded at that, understanding her point and adding it to how Imoen had spoken to her before. Dynaheir, on the other hand, was more blunt about her own concerns. "I want to make certain you don't turn the young paladin away from the light. A fallen paladin with the power of Bhaal would be disastrous for the world."

"Just as I am certain the forces of darkness would feel about a son of the God of murder giving his loyalty and all the power that comes with it to any of the Triad. Including my own patroness," Viconia retorted, a snarl on her lips. "And as for using my feminine wiles to change Harry's mind, I do not know if we have met the same individual. Harry seems remarkably independent-minded, especially for a do-gooder like a normal paladin is supposed to be, and not at all susceptible to... a taste of the dark, shall we say? If he was more normal for the breed, I would be most pleased. But as is, I suppose I will take what I can get."

"And we are just supposed to take your word for it? For the fact you won't play with Harry's emotions? Do you take us for fools? He offers you safety. How much would you be willing to pay to turn him from his course so he can keep doing that?" Dynaheir growled out in response.

"Ladies, you're both pretty, but back to your respective corners, please," Imoen said, taking a quick step forward, then backward, literally pushing between Vickinia and Dynaheir. "Come on, let's not get heated here."

Nearby, Alora chomped down on a handful of popcorn, the noise of it drawing the eyes of the quartet of women.

Harry had made it the night before as a treat for them all when they had found wild corn of all things in the remnants of a farm deep into the woods. Jaheira had railed at the very idea of a family coming out all this way, separated from Beregost by several days' travel through the woods to start a farm. Everyone else had simply been pleased that some of the cornstalks actually had corn still on them despite how late in the season it was and the depredations of the animals. With it, Harry had made popcorn, adding salt, pepper and butter to a covered iron skillet before adding dried corn kernels. When the kernels burst, they became covered in butter, salt and pepper.

Most of the party hadn't liked the taste, but Alora and Imoen had both enjoyed it immensely. "Don't mind me, just enjoying the show."

"This show is over," Jaheira stated firmly, nodding her head towards the young gnome. Things had been about to get ugly for a moment there, and she wondered if maybe Alora had been deliberately loud in an attempt to help Imoen keep the peace.

Turning back to Viconia, she kept her voice even. "Simply make certain that Harry understands that while the two of you might be getting close and might form a physical relationship, he should not allow himself to get emotionally attached to you or you to him. Note I am not as concerned about you influencing him as Dynaheir is. It might be a legitimate concern for most, but Harry is pigheaded and stubborn in a way that few men can match.

Dynaheir scowled but, under the gazes of Imoen and Jaheira, had to concede the point. Viconia nodded thoughtfully, and answered that she would endeavor to not get emotionally entangled with Harry or vice versa. "But while I can certainly control my emotions, you will have to talk to Harry about his."

"Trust me, that's on the docket, too," Imoen drawled, shaking her head. "In fact, this the first thing we're going to do when we're back at the house."

That conversation was actually the only bit of excitement that the group saw on their way back to Beregost. The next two days were remarkably cold, with Jaheira staring up at the sky, watching for snow, and all of them shivering a bit despite their fur-lined outfits. There was no falling snow by the time they got back to Beregost, but it was clear that autumn was rapidly ending and winter was closing in. To the point that Harry and Edwin agreed that they, along with Alora and Imoen, probably needed more layers of clothing. Unless they wanted to use Harry and Imoen's heating spells, which seemed a waste of both health points and effort.

Soon, Harry and his party stepped into the temple, meeting with Kelddath and handing him the holy symbol Basilus had been carrying with them. As Kelddath looked at it with distaste, he began mumbling a prayer under his breath.

Harry gave a report of how the fight had gone, although not in any detail. "We also didn't run into that warrior woman that you said might be in the area challenging men to fights. The second opponent we faced was certainly not a priest of Cyric or a woman."

"If you can follow rumors that hold only twenty percent of the truth, you are well ahead of the game. We knew a second enemy might join with this Basilus. Let it stand at that for now." Kelddath shook his head, then released the object from his hand. As the others watched, it passed through a series of sunbeams coming through the multi-colored glass of the temple's windows. And as it did, the sign of Cyric caught fire, turning into ash and smoke before the sigil could touch the ground. "Good riddance."

Turning his attention full on Harry and his band, Kelddath frowned thoughtfully. "Normally, I would be giving you quite a bit of gold for performing a service like this for the temple and Beregost, but considering our deal, and..." He glanced at the party, easily spotting Viconia's lusher-than-normal elven form despite the color change charm on her hair and skin. "Who you travel with, that will not be happening."

He then sighed and, with a bit of reluctance, continued. "Still, this man was a direct threat not only to Beregost, but he also worshiped a Dark God who stands against Lathander. As such, I feel I need to offer you something beyond my approval. I will allow you and yours to use my temple's services at the same price I would charge anyone else. Further, I will write out a note for our various merchants. They will give you a slight discount on my word."

Harry nodded at that, then asked about Mellicamp and whether or not he had already been sent on to his master. At that, Kelddath's expression closed down a bit, showing positively that he had problems with either Mellicamp or his master or both. "After you left, Mellicamp seemed in no great rush to have one of us travel with him to the High Hedge, and frankly, I had no desire to send any of mine on that small journey. Do you wish to take him now?"

"No," Harry decided, glancing outside. It was already around four in the afternoon, by his reckoning, and the sky was almost completely dark already. "Keep him here for the night. We'll be by tomorrow morning. Right now, I think home and hearth call to us."

Kelddath nodded and, surprising Harry, reached out to shake his hand.

Due to the completion of the quest **Things that Go Bump in the Forest** and the death of a priest of Cyric, High Priest Kelddath's opinion of you has changed dramatically. He still doesn't like you or your companions all that much, but he respects you, at least.

This has gone a long way to redeem you and your party in the eyes of the locals. Well done.

Moments later, the rest of the party headed home while Harry stopped in to talk to Officer Valerie. He told her an abbreviated version of the same story he told Kelddath about the fight, and like Kelddath, Valerie's respect for him rose tremendously. That was a good thing because after they returned from the High Hedge, Harry intended to spend a good deal of money re-equipping his party as best as possible for both the winter and going forward.

That night, everyone was too tired for Harry to make a big meal. Something that actually had Imoen putting off the conversation she wanted to have with her cousin-turned-half-brother.

Unaware of this close call, Harry simply made a quick dinner of sandwiches before bedding down in the kitchen. To Imoen and Dynaheir's chagrin, Viconia joined him there once more, but she was asleep soon after she slid into her bedroll. Days on the trail in the cold and with rain having hit them more than once had taken their toll on her far more than Harry or Minsc, the party's two endurance monsters.

The next morning, the others woke up to the smell of a celebratory breakfast. They all lingered over the meal for quite a while, and it was almost noon by the time they left to pick up Mellicamp and then leave Beregost once more, heading west this time.

Thankfully, this journey was a good deal shorter. The High Hedge was the same distance away from Beregost as Fisherman's Lake but further north and a smidge more straight west towards the coast. And once more, the gods of randomness were on their side as the party didn't run into any trouble on the way out. This meant that by the time evening was falling, they were within sight of the High Hedge, the seat of Thalantyr the Conjuror.

This turned out to be the biggest building that Harry had seen yet, at least a quarter again the size of the temple to the morning Lord. "Which, come to think of it, might explain why Kelddath didn't really want to help Thalantyr's apprentice and has a dislike for both men. I doubt the priest to a god, no matter what kind of god he is, really likes acknowledging the fact that a wizard has a larger place than him," Harry mused aloud as he stared at the octagonal building ahead of them.

The building was built within eight large towers, each of which looked like they had been taken out of a castle, the towers defining the octagonal points of the central building. All told, the place looked as if it was built for a siege, which, considering the lawlessness of the sword coast, made some sense. *Although probably not for one person. In that case, it just seems like an ego trip.*

Edwin chuckled quietly. "Indeed. The fact that wizards and the clergy rarely get along very well outside of adventuring parties is perhaps another issue entirely. But if you think this building is overdone, you should see some of the wizard towers in Thay. What they lack in simple, brutal militarism, they make up for in sheer splendor, size and, above all, height. The better to look down on those of us who have yet to rise to the station of Grand Wizard, reminding us of our station and how far we have yet to see."

Dynaheir shook her head firmly. "As if true scholars of magic should care over the trappings of power. I would find more magic within a simple hut of Rashmemon with my fellow witches than in any grand tower. As for Thanaltyr, I can only hope that his ego does not match the size of his building."

The chicken mumbled something, but as Viconia had gone to the effort of muzzling the little creature, no one else could understand what he was saying, thankfully. He'd been whining as they began their trip out of Beregost, trying to convince the party that they should turn around and ask Kelddath to transform him back to his human body and not bother his master. The more he spoke, the more certain that Harry and the others became that they really should deliver him to Thalantyr and not just to have Mellicamp turned back into his human form. No one who had good relations with his master would be so eager to find another solution to his current trouble.

As they neared the large building, Harry frowned, asking Jaheira, Khalid and Viconia to examine the towers, specifically the arrow slits up there. At the same time, he asked everyone to put their weapons away, even their shields. Only the wizards were allowed to carry their staffs, with Jaheira arguing but vociferously against putting her own away. Yet Harry was adamant. "This place was very obviously made to withstand attack. I don't think we want to look as if we're about to attack the place if it is at all defended. And Jaheira, I've seen you wield that staff. I know precisely how aggressive you can appear with it."

That caused Khalid to burst out into laughter, while Minsc nodded sagely, and Jaheira blushed a bit. "It is true, Jaheira might be most formidable with her sling and spell, but the good druidess can still swing a mean staff in the pursuit of righteousness!"

Thankfully, it didn't seem as if any of the towers were manned. The group speculated on that, reasoning why it was so and why the towers were there at all if they weren't manned as they made their way to the large door leading within. After spending a few moments pounding on the door and receiving no reply, Harry pushed it open. The door opened easily, not even locked, showing them into a hallway that seemed to go around the outer edge of the building, judging by how it disappeared to either side around the corner.

But almost immediately, Harry saw something strange on his map and murmured to Jaheira for a moment. "We have one blue dot in the center and two red dots moving slowly down the corridor. Act like you heard something in the distance, something you don't like."

Like much of what else Harry could do with his Advanced Adventuring System, he wanted to keep the map secret from Mellicamp, who at present could see them. Jaheira understood this within a few seconds of thought and did so.

When Jaheira finished speaking, Harry looked over at Dynaheir, who had lost the latest rounds of rock paper scissors to carry the chicken despite the glares she gave her opponents at the time. "Take his gag off. I want to know what we're dealing with here."

"I have no idea!" Mellicamp the chicken stated as soon as the gag was removed. "Look, good fellows, the last time I was here, there were no security features beyond a few things on the inner doors to my Master's laboratory and living quarters. If he has added more, I would suggest we all leave lest he think we're bothering him! Master Thalantyr is a recluse by choice and does not like to be bothered! Believe me, I know. And he might well see my unpleasant chicken-dom as a bother in and of itself. If it annoys him enough, he might just make it permanent!"

Harry frowned a bit, looking at his map again and seeing that the red dots had come closer. From the magically infused lights lining the cool hallway, Harry could see something metallic gleaming around the bend. "Is it just me, or is whatever it is gleaming like metal?"

The others had no answers for that, although Edwin, Khalid and Jaheira all looked concerned. That was enough for Harry. "Let's go the opposite direction. For some reason, I don't think we want to meet whatever that is."

With Henry in the lead and Minsc and Khalid at the back, the group formed into a double line formation and moved down the hallway. Soon, they came upon an opening leading into a large laboratory that, if Harry were to guess, took up a large majority of the building. At the far end of that space stood a man, writing some notes on parchment, while two magical quills floated in the air around him, writing down something else at the same time.

And as usual when Harry was seeing new people, his Observation skill activated.

Name: Thalantyr.

Occupation: mage, level ???

Gender: Male

An enchanter and former adventurer, Thalantyr settled it into the High Hedge with the purpose of never being bothered by anyone again, only to realize that such plans were impossible to accomplish on a planet with so many other people and their annoyances. Worse yet, as a favor for a friend from his adventuring days, Thalantyr was forced to not only open his shop to anyone with money to buy things, and thus having to deal with people stopping by but also to take on an apprentice.

What he thinks about said apprentice is not obvious at this time.

Another person whose level is too high for my Identify ability to tell me much. Great. At least my AAS wasn't snarky enough to tell me to avoid angering him at all costs like it did with Drizzt, Harry thought, whispering aloud to his group, "Please, everyone, be **polite**." The emphasis he put on that and the looks he gave his party made it very clear that he did not want to fight this guy, and they all nodded back with various levels of understanding.

The man had heard the group enter and turned, scowling. But before he could say anything, Harry held up his hands showing he was completely unharmed, and with his hands still up, bowed from the waist. *Polite, be polite. Do not attempt to fight the mage in his own place of power, particularly when you still don't know what those two red dots behind you are.*

"Mage Thalantyr? I am sorry to interrupt your studies. But we have a chicken here that claims to be your apprentice. We went to high priest Kalddath first, and he confirmed that the voice at least matched your apprentice, and we decided to bring him here."

The man's eyes widened, and he snorted a bit. He clicked his fingers, and a series of cobblestones beneath him glowed. They quickly flowed up until they formed a large chair,

whereupon several cushions flew from other areas in the room to land atop it. The last one hadn't even finished settling into position before Thalantyr sat down, staring at Harry. "So, you found Mellicamp, did you? And the buffoon was desperate enough that he cast the spell he stole from me on himself? Or was that some mistake?"

"So he was indeed a thief. As well as a coward, we thought as much," Dynaheir spoke up as the group moved into the room, spreading out but keeping their hands visible and showing they didn't even have shields, let alone weapons to hand. She held out the chicken, his beak covered again after trying to get an answer about the red dots on Harry's map a moment ago. "Yet still, he is here, and if you wish to punish him for the theft, you will first have to take it off our hands, please."

That caused Thalantyr to let loose a small chuckle. "True enough. I don't like the little rat. He's one of those buffoons who think that everything should be handed to them on a silver platter the instant he opens up a book. Yet he is also excellent at organizing and cleaning, both things that I have to admit I struggle with. Set the cage down over there."

Dynaheir did so, setting the cage down on top of a series of concentric runic circles of a type that Harry had never seen before. And for the first time, Harry's observation skill couldn't tell him anything about what he was seeing.

Thalantyr has activated a magical field. But as you lack knowledge of runic languages, observation cannot tell you what effect this might have. Besides the obvious, anyway.

As Harry finished reading that small message, the chicken first grew to the size of a human being, shattering its cage, and then, with the most horrible sound that Harry had ever heard, it began to shift and twist. The chicken let loose a howl of pain, which only stopped as the transformation did.

Where before there had stood a large chicken, now stood a small young man, a little younger than Harry, with the build of someone who was a pure academic who hadn't worked a day in his life. "Master I, Master you..." The boy stuttered.

"Silence. You stole from me, and I do not care what circumstances forced you to use that spell on yourself," Thalantyr said mildly, but the youth shut his mouth with a clap that Harry could hear from where he stood. "The pain you felt as I restored your body to you is only the start of your punishments. Now stand there and be silent."

Thalantyr turned to Harry, shaking his head. "I suppose I should give you something in recompense for bringing my chief organizer back to me. You can browse my wares. They are on those first two shelves out from the door. I will warn you, though, that my prices are quite

steep. And attempt to steal or pick up anything from the other bookcases or display racks and you will not live very long, yet will regret it for what little time remains to you.”

“Are you willing to take credit?” Harry asked, pulling out the script for ten thousand gold that Jaheira and Khalid had gotten from the Harper messenger, only to stop as Thalantyr let loose a crack of laughter and changing tack, his Barter skill activating automatically. “Or are you willing to mark down your prices at the word of the high priest?”

Charisma check passed.

Perhaps because he is out of practice, Thalantyr is remarkably easy to convince to at least look at the writ from the high priest. Despite his personal antipathy for the man, judging by the scowl on his face.

The wizard gestured, and Harry held out the note from the high priest, which floated out of his hand towards the wizard. He caught it, unrolling it, and read quickly before shrugging his shoulders and tossing it back to Harry, who quickly caught it, the scroll rolling up mid-air at some unseen spell. *Is he doing this all with runes? Or with latent enchantments embedded into the room?* Harry wondered, as again, his observation skill couldn’t tell them anything. There was no actual spell being cast. Whatever was going on with the floating objects and everything had to do with already cast enchantments or the unknown runic language.

“Well, I can accept that. It seems as if you are doing services for the temple and the town, and in this parlous time, I suppose that should be rewarded in some manner. Even I have heard about the stirrings of war between Amn and Baldur’s Gate. But only a 10% markdown, mind you.”

“10%, and one spell scroll for returning Mellicamp to you specifically,” Harry stated quickly, hoping his barter skill would help them again.

“No,” Thalantyr answered easily as this time, Harry’s charisma check failed. “Mellicamp isn’t worth one of my specialized spell scrolls.”

“Then perhaps while the rest of my companions are searching for baubles, can I ask you a series of questions? After all, knowledge is the most precious of all commodities,” Edwin inquired, stepping forward before Harry could ask, undercutting him a bit, which annoyed Harry.

Thalantyr looked at Edwin with scant favor, taking in the red robes Edwin still wore even now, with a faint sneer on his face. “Ask your questions, although I reserve the right to not answer if I think the answers are above your level, Red Wizard.”

At that, Harry’s observation noted something.

It seems to you as if Thalantyr has no love for the red wizards of Thay. He might feel some obligation to answer a younger wizard's questions up to a certain point, or he might let his prejudices get in the way of doing so honestly. And in magic, as in many things, a wrong answer, or one that seems to be correct and isn't, could be far more dangerous than no knowledge at all.

Upon reflection, Harry decided to not mention this to Edwin. Edwin was more than smart enough to take anything the older wizard with a grain of salt. Instead, as the others began to spread out and look for items, he asked, "Tell me, do you sell potion recipes?"

Thalantyr's face closed down entirely, becoming almost thunderous, and Dynaheir interjected hastily. "Harry, you do not know what you ask! Talking shop like that, exchanging potion recipes, or anything of that nature like you are common chefs or housewives is not something enchanters or alchemists do. Potion makers and enchanters have one thing in common only, they are very protective of their skills. Forget him, Master Thalantyr. Harry has only just recently discovered that his Master Chef skill can lead him into the realm of potionmaking."

Thalantyr's face shifted expression back to its normal sternness rather than cold anger, and he took Dynaheir in from head to toe for a moment, making Harry's observation pipe up again with the thought that the man might well have been lacking in female companionship for a while and that having four attractive women in his party might be part of why the man was being so 'welcoming' right now. Or five even, if someone thought that Alora was good-looking, and Harry assumed that for her race, she might well be.

"I see. I have not heard of that connection before, but I can see that it is possible. Yet your companion is right, young man. Enchanters like myself can indeed become potion makers, and I am indeed one. But I will not share my secrets nor sell recipes to anyone else," Thalantyr growled.

The glare he gave Harry had Harry nodding and apologizing for his unintentional social faux pas. The use of that term caused Thalantyr's lips to twitch into an almost smile, and after seeing the man waved him off, Harry turned away, joining his fellows to look at the items for sale while Edwin moved forward, speaking quietly to the high mage.

A sudden thought occurred to Harry as he turned away from the two mages, and he quickly gestured at Jaheira and Khalid to watch Alora. At that, both half-elves' eyes widened, and they resolutely moved to either side of the halfling, keeping one eye on her at all times as they moved around and between the four bookshelves that Thalantyr had gestured to. The last thing any of them wanted was to have Alora try to steal something from a master enchanter.

As Harry investigated the enchanted items, he became more certain that it would be a very bad idea. Particularly when he found two items sitting side-by-side, both of which looked like pieces of a greater demon. One of the two items was a clawed hand, gnarled with age, or perhaps the, the drying out process? Harry wasn't certain, but the hand had very clearly not been cut off cleanly, and the scales of the hand reflected the light of the laboratory eerily.

Cursed Claw of Kazgaroth

This claw was taken from the corpse of the great beast Kazgaroth by Thalantyr and carries many of the same magics the great beast did when it died. If carried on the person of someone, those same magics will spread to the wearer.

However, that power is fueled by the blood of its wearer. Because of this, the wearer of the claw will often be more sickly and therefore more susceptible to poisons.

Effects: Wearer is given 50% chance to dodge magic spells, breath attacks, or instant death skills.

-2 to Constitution

Restrictions: Not usable by Wizard Slayers

Durability: 100/100

Cost: Thalantyr will sell this item to you for 13,500 gold.

Note: due to your deal with Officer Vai and High Priest Kelddath, the local merchants will not sell you anything at the normal party neutral price beyond basic supplies. Anything else will only be marked down from the worst price they can sell you anything for by ten percent. You can haggle it lower with some merchants, but not all.

Harry grimaced at the price. The thing was interesting, but not at that price, although what that said about how much everything else in here was going to cost pained him. *Honestly, if I thought Thalantyr would let us return I might simply tell everyone to wait. But given his attitude I don't think that's going to happen. And given how much trouble we had putting the drow wizard down, I want everyone to have some kind of magical weapon to turn to at need going forward.*

He didn't know why, but Harry had a feeling somehow that the winter wasn't going to be the nice, semi-lazy time that the others thought. He just knew that something was going to happen or one of the quests they found was going to end up a lot bigger than they had feared. Maybe because everything since he and the locals had their little back-and-forth had gone so well? Regardless, Harry felt that getting his band the best equipment they could have would be imperative going forward.

Shaking that thought off, Harry looked at the second item that looked as if it had been taken from the body of some demonic beast. In this case it was the beast's horn, made to look like a signal horn, which, in Harry's opinion, was a marked improvement on the whole severed hand thing. *Honestly, who would willingly carry that thing around? Even without the curse.*

Horn of Kazgaroth

Named in the same straightforward manner as the Claw, the horn too came from Thalantyr's defeat of the great beast of Kazgaroth. In this case, though, while the ideas for the enchantments on the item came from his fight with it's previous owner, Thalantyr put the enchantments on this item. As such, it is not cursed, but it is somewhat more limited.

Those enchantments create a globe of power that gives the user partial magical resistance, a saving throw bonus, and deflects incoming missiles attacks. The effect only lasts two minutes, and the spells degrade each time they are used. At present, there is enough magic held within the horn for 15 uses.

Effects: Immunity to all level 1 & 2 spells for two minutes.

+2 bonus to evasion against all attacks, normal, breath, magical, or area of effect.

Armor class goes up +5 against all missile attacks.

Restrictions: This horn can't be used by clerics or druids – and all the class combinations having one of these – and thieves.

Harry didn't even bother finishing reading the description before swiping it away with an eye flick. *That will be a no to both. I really don't want the hit to my Constitution from the Claw, or to be that susceptible to poison. The other sounds interesting, but I would want to put it on one of our healers so they could keep the rest of us in the fight, and that isn't necessary. Plus, I don't want to know how expensive it is, since I think the Horn is actually the better item of the two.*

Continuing on, Harry soon found himself in the potions section, where he began examining them all avidly, one after the other. Thalantyr had a huge selection, and many of them caught his eye.

Dynaheir was the first of his companions to come over to Harry, asking a question that was slowly moving to the top of all of their heads as they looked at the items for sale. "What exactly is our budget here?"

"Considering that he isn't willing to take the line of credit, I have to assume that the blacksmith will, let's say... five thousand or so? That will leave us with over three thousand gold and the jewels and things we've picked up recently, as well as everything else we might be able

to sell to the blacksmith.” *And I can hope that my barter skill works better on him than it did on Thalantyr.*

While a large number, in comparison to what they were seeing, that wasn’t a lot, and Dynaheir frowned at him. But Harry replied that weapons and armor were more important, and that there was at least one expensive item at the blacksmith he wanted to see that if they could purchase.

“Harry, that might be a little too limiting. Look at this,” Jaheira stated, gesturing to Harry over them. She had found a series of enchanted sling stones, sling stones that had the property of ice, electricity and fire specifically. But they were two hundred and sixty gold for five of the slingstones, which meant that thirty of them would be one thousand, five hundred and thirty-six gold. Similarly, the mage had acid arrows and arrows +1, arrows enchanted to do a little extra damage. He even had Darts of acid, electricity and so forth. *Not to mention all the potions I want a sample of.*

“I think we will need to raise the amount we’re willing to spend here to at least seven thousand,” Jaheira confessed.

Harry scowled a little, looking around at the others, but Khalid and most of the rest of his party nodded firm agreement, all of them rather sheepishly holding up things they wanted to buy. The only ones who didn’t were Alora, Imoen and Minsc.

Minsc and Imoen didn’t seem all that interested in anything. In contrast Alora, in a show of remarkable self-control, had stuffed her hands into her pocket and was rocking slowly back and forth, her eyes closed. From where he was standing, Harry could make out a minor mutter coming from her. “Don’t look at the shinies, don’t look at the shinies. Don’t be tempted, don’t be tempted. Magic is more trouble than your fingers can wiggle you out of.”

Harry sighed, and seeing as they did have a point, he nodded. “All right. Three spell scrolls for the magic users. I want to buy at least two potions of healing and a potion of health for all of our frontline fighters and one potion of health for everyone else. On top of that, that two potions of explosion... and one of regeneration.”

Given how the potion of explosion had come up in conversation once Harry had found out he might be able to make his own, seeing it here was giving Harry ideas. While Thalantyr had said that he wouldn’t sell any actual recipes, Harry was a Master Chef. It’d been a long while since he had essentially reverse-engineered someone else’s cooking to figure out how they had gotten the taste and color and so forth. Whether or not that would carry over into potions was a question, but he was willing to try.

By the look in her eyes, Viconia understood that although the rest of his party failed to understand Harry's motives there. Tactically, his decisions on potions still made sense to them, and they all nodded while Harry saw a small notification.

You have earned fifty interest points from Viconia. She likes it when you're sneaky.

The spells were easy enough for everyone to agree on. Viconia Jaheira and Dynaheir talked about it for a few moments and decided to buy two offensive spells and one defensive spell. The defensive spell Detect Invisibility had Harry nodding his head rapidly, fully understanding why that was a good idea to have on hand.

In fact, Harry wondered if that was the perfect spell to try to learn himself, his thoughts going back to the conversation he'd had with Viconia by the river: about how it might be possible for Harry and Imoen to learn spells from this world and simply empower them through their blood magic. It hadn't worked with her cleric-type spells, and Harry felt that probably meant it wouldn't work with Druid spells either. Wizard-type spells, on the other hand? That could be an interesting experiment.

The other two offensive spells were Skull Trap, a level III spell, and Spook. Harry wasn't certain why Spook was such a good find, but he didn't argue with Dynaheir on it. Whereas Skull Trap was an obvious one.

Skull Trap

Coming from the Necromancy school of magic, this spell creates a skull from either the ground or nearby bones, containing within the skull a explosive spell. When a creature – any creature - comes within twenty feet of it the spell is triggered and the skull explodes, damaging everyone within a thirty foot radius.

Effects: Explosive damage is dealt to everything within the area of effect. The damaged inflicted is equal to 6 Hit Points **per level of the caster**, or half with a successful Save vs. Spell.

Because the Skull Trap is both shrapnel and magical in nature, the explosive magical damage can be potentially blocked by magic resistance or defensive spells against magical damage. Similarly, the physical damage can be reduced through armor, Durability, or natural resistance against slashing or penetrating damage.

Once a Skull Trap is cast it will be seen on your map as a small orange dot until detonated.

Limitations: Not usable by Illusionists

Level 3 Spell Scroll: This can be used once by a wizard, or a wizard can attempt to memorize it, placing it in his personal spell book.

While that part was relatively easy, the conversation of what long-range type of enchanted weapons to purchase almost became an argument until Harry stepped in once again. "Given how Minsc or you normally join me on the front lines, and you and Imoen have traps and backstabbing, I don't think arrows should be our priority. Twenty acid arrows and twenty +1 arrows only, Khalid. For now. We might find more at the blacksmith's. That will allow us to spend more on enchanted sling stones for Dynaheir, Edwin and Jaheira to use. Enchanted darts for Viconia to give her a long-range magical weapon skill, too. Both of which we might not be able to find elsewhere."

This division made no one really happy, but they had to admit Harry had a point, and after much grumbling, the party's purchases were all brought together. All told, they spent around seven thousand one hundred gold, an amount that put a faint smile on Thalantyr's face, even as he stared at Harry thoughtfully, watching the youth put the potions they bought into the new potion case they had also bought for the purpose. His eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Harry worried that Thalantyr was on to Harry, but the Enchanter simply smirked after a few seconds and shook his head. It was as if he knew that Harry would fail if he tried to figure out how to make those potions.

That smirk stayed on Thalantyr's face as he looked at Edwin, who looked extremely pretty pleased, staring down at the Mysteriously Magically Enhanced Girdle that the party had found way back from the weird ogre with the obsession with belts. Edwin had demanded it of the party a while back, sensing the magics within and being intrigued by the mystery. He'd worked on it on and off ever since, and Edwin and Thalantyr had been doing something to the belt while everyone else was looking at the items Thalantyr had on sale, but Harry hadn't been close enough to see what was going on. The smug look on Edwin's face told him that Edwin at least was pleased, despite not having been part of the shopping spree.

After purchasing the items, Harry thanked Thalantyr for the opportunity and then asked a question that had been at the back of his mind throughout the time they spent in the laboratory-come-sleeping quarters. "By the way, Master Thalantyr, we were concerned about the two red dots that you seem to have patrolling the hallway outside. Are they something you have devised or something that is going out of control?"

"They are within my control, although I would tell you to avoid them at all costs. After Mellicamp absconded with my experimental transfiguration scroll, I was subsequently attacked by a group of hobgoblin buffoons. They interrupted my attempts to re-create the scroll, and that annoyed me tremendously. Because of that, I created two adamantine golems to patrol the outer corridor," Thalantyr stated, smiling thinly.

The term wasn't enough on its own to activate Harry's bestiary page, which he knew would include golems after the first time they'd been through Beregost and the battle against Silk. But judging by the sudden white faces of Edwin, Dynaheir, Khalid and Jaheira, it wasn't a good thing. Even Alora looked a little shocked and resolutely jammed her hands back into her sleeves, rocking in place. She had let down her guard against her kleptomania for a second when it looked like they were about to leave.

"I see. Well, we won't bother you again, Master Thalantyr. I wish you all the luck in instilling some manner of work ethic in Mellicamp," Harry said, gesturing everyone out the door.

Imoen was first out the door, and Harry quickly nodded in her direction, indicating that the red dots were nowhere between them and the exit to the High Hedge. And as they raced along, he asked everyone what an adamantite golem, was like, information that turned his own face just as white as everyone else's. He in no way wanted to tangle with something made out of magical metal that would essentially make all of their weapons useless and would even absorb or deflect most magical spells. Oh, while also admitting poison gas and dealing crushing damage with every blow.

Outside, Harry breathed a sigh of relief, rubbing one hand down his face and staring at Dynaheir and Edwin. "No offense to you two as fellow magic users, but while Thalantyr might come off as helpful, he is also quite a bit more terrifying than Kelddath, and I think that before the temple, thank you."

"Half naked sirines or murderous adamantite golems, yeah, that's a no-brainer," Imoen muttered, with Viconia of all people agreeing, looking about as scared as Harry was. When Harry looked at her, she explained that she knew those creatures, having seen a few of them, but they were called something else in the Underdark, and she hadn't made the connection until Khalid and the others explained about their abilities.

Dynaheir simply nodded while Edwin rolled his eyes, looking down at the belt in his hand avariciously. The item was still showing up with a few question marks and Harry's identity skill, although what he could see made him understand why Edwin was so eager to have the thing.

Belt of Slightly Less Mysteriously Magically Enhanced Girdle (Temp Name)

While there are still mysteries about this, yes, still Cursed item, there can be no doubt that most of the magic within is very much of the helpful nature.

Effects: The belt allows the wearer a 50% better chance of not having his spells interrupted by being hit by enemy attacks.

The belt helps the mental acuity of the wearer to the point where he or she can add one fifth, one sixth and one seventh level spell to his daily spellbook.

???

Durability: 90/100

Limitations: Usable only by magic users. Even a dual class Adventurer would not be able to wear this belt.

Note: The underlying Curse on this object is still unknown.

Figuring that Edwin had at least been told about the curse but felt he could handle it, Harry turned away from the wizard, looking around at the rest of the party. Since it was now night out, there was only one thing to do. "Let's find a place to camp out for the night and then head back to Beregost in the morning. These short days are getting annoying."

"Welcome to winter in any land," Jaheira said, shaking her head, while Khalid nodded his head rapidly, giving his wife a side-eyed look. "Just wait until the sun starts to set at around midafternoon. It gets remarkably depressing remarkably quickly."

"S, s, she means to say that she gets d, d, depressed remarkably quickly a, a, and tends to take it out on other p, p, people occasionally," Khalid said as an aside.

His wife heard that and glared at him but did admit that was true, then said something in Elvish to Khalid, who chuckled and nodded, admitting in common that he also had similar issues in the morning when there was snow on the ground. He became remarkably resistant to any efforts to get him out of bed.

The group all chuckled at that and headed away from High Hedge in the general direction of Beregost but with an eye on finding someplace to spend the night. And as usual, Jaheira was able to find them a decent camping spot.

This close to High Hedge, Harry figured that any bandits who had a single thought in their heads would not be in the area, and he decided that they all could get some sleep that night. This proved accurate, although the hasty breakfast he and Viconia put together for the party the next morning wound up being interrupted. But not from any exterior source. Rather, an interior one.

Everyone else was gathered around the fireplace bar Edwin, who Harry noted was doing something with the belt again. Shrugging his shoulders, Harry turned away, finishing up the breakfast, and beginning to handout plates. This was why he and all of the others missed Edwin unlocking the belt with a spell that he must have devoted a spell slot to the evening before and putting the belt on eagerly.

There was a sudden loud *BAMF* noise and an explosion of pink and gray smoke. This caused everyone to twist around to stare at Edwin, only to not see him. His body had disappeared in the cloud of smoke, which rapidly flowed away from where he had been standing.

“Edwin! What the hell happened?” Harry demanded.

There was a coughing noise from within the fog, the coping noise that sounded a little too low to be that of Edwin, but he made no reply as the smoke dissipated. And then, as they stared at what lay revealed, the laughter began, as Edwin, or rather the woman that Edwin had turned into, shouted, “What in the world just happened to me! What are these things I have on my chest, and why is my voice so squeaky!?”

End Chapter

yes, dear readers, I decided to shift the Belt of Sex Change to Baldur’s Gate 1 from Baldur’s Gate 2. Say hello to Edwina, everybody. Whether or not he stays like that for a while is a point I am still debating. Tell me what you all think about it.

Those of you who played the original game might also have noticed that I did not include a possible meeting with Kivan, a Ranger companion and one of the best pure archer types in the game. I decided to move that meeting to later when we reach the Cloakwood Forest. I figure he would be right on the heels of his wife’s kidnappers/murderers. Honestly, I hope to use the winter to add to the group’s weapons/armor, Harry’s leadership/search for a deity, and push ahead with the romance between Harry and Viconia. I don’t think Kivan would be willing to just sit in Beregost and help the party with the Oath Harry is currently being held too.

And, of course, I also shifted things around in terms of world-building. A few of the quests have been removed or shifted into new areas, and the whole ancient Ulcaster ghost/academy thing that you can run into in the Ulcaster zone has been changed as well. I figure there needs to be a reason for that and for the truly massive Firewine Bridge. How to explain a random bridge of that size so far away from nominal civilization? Paint a nasty picture of an ancient disaster. Nuff said.

The same went with the Power Word, Stun. At higher levels, the Power Word type spells will act as they did in the game, attacking everyone in an area. At this level, it only attacks one.

Ooh, also had Thalantyr using Adamantine golems. Given his really high level and the rest of the changes I made to him, I felt this fit better.