



Chapter 3

The team carried the little girl to a straw mat in the orc lair and lay her down. Grant scanned her:

NPC

Name: Marlana

Race: Foxtan

Level: 0

Class: None

HP: 2

Status: Poisoned

“What does NPC mean?” He asked.

“Non-Player Character,” Eric answered. Seeing the blank looks on the others’ faces, he explained. “It means she’s not a person like us, but a character controlled by the computer. Like an AI.” The group nodded. “What’s wrong with her?” He asked Grant.

“Poison.” Grant saw the HP flicker and drop from 2 to 1. “She’s down to one HP.”

“She’s dying. If she reaches zero, she’ll be dead.” Eric checked his spells, but he lacked the ability to cure poison.

Grant shrugged. “She’s not real, anyway, so who cares?”

“We need her to get the first quest,” Eric said. “Plus, experience. You don’t have cure poison?”

Grant checked his spells. “Nope.” Having bought into the notion that helping the girl would benefit him, he lay hands on her and cast heal, once more feeling a buzz of pleasure.

“I thought you couldn’t cure poison?” Paul said.

“I can’t, but I can keep her alive as long as I have mana. I can cast heal three times before I need to wait to recharge, and I’ve cast it twice so...”

“Everyone search again. Look everywhere.” Eric said, beginning to dig through the orc mess.

“For what?” Hal said.

“Whatever we missed. They wouldn’t put us in this situation without a possible solution.”

They all three started to search, while Grant waited with the little girl, watching her health, which lingered on 2.

Back in the real world, Kim and Madison watched.

“Should we give them a hint?” Kim asked.

“Let’s let it play out a little longer.”

Searching her memory of previous game experiences, Eric said, “Check your inventory, your skills. We missed something.”

Hal checked his own inventory and didn’t see anything that would help. Then, he checked his skills and saw, “Detect Secret Doors.” He decided to give it a try. The 20-sided die appeared, rolling across the floor.

It came up 20. Madison and Kim cheered.

“She’s back down to 1,” Grant said. “I’m casting my last heal spell.”

Hal saw a panel in the wall glow. A box appeared. “Secret Door Detected.”

“There’s a secret door,” he shouted, rushing over to the glowing panel. “How do I open it?”

Eric joined him at the spot. “Press around the area or look for some sort of hidden switch.”

Hal pressed, but the wall was solid. He looked around and saw the torch on the wall. He grabbed the iron torch holder and pulled. It swung down, and the grinding sound of stone on stone filled the room as the secret door opened. Glancing inside, he saw treasure—potions, scrolls and some gleaming gold coins. “Treasure,” he said. He almost grabbed it all, but resisted the impulse.

“She’s back down to one,” Grant called, watching as the little fox girl’s breathing became more and more shallow. In spite of himself, he found himself worrying about her, wanting her to live.

There were three potion bottles in the alcove. “Which one?” Hal said.

Eric clicked on them. “The blue one,” he said. “Quick.”

Now, Hal grabbed the bottle and the rest of the treasure and rushed over to Grant. Grant took the potion bottle and popped the stopper off, “Can I just throw it on her?”

“Potions have to be drank,” Madison cut in. “Drunk? Drank?” She’d have to look that up. She was a STEM girl.

Syl’s HP started blinking and the words “Imminent Death” flashed above her.

Grant opened Marlana’s mouth and began to dribble the potion onto her tongue. The girl’s body reacted, she drank and he poured more into her mouth. Imminent Death faded away. A few moments later, half the potion gone, her status changed from poisoned to normal. She coughed and opened her eyes. Looking at Grant, her face lit up. “An angel,” she said.



“I’m not...”

The girl threw her arms around Grant’s neck. He awkwardly put a hand on her back, overwhelmed with a sudden surge of emotion. He’d had a daughter once, it seemed like a lifetime ago, and she’d hugged him like this. He’d long since grown to dislike children intensely, but he remembered now there has been a time... He shoved the memory from his mind, turning away from the pain.

The hug ended. The girl looked at the group. "Can you help me save my family?" She asked. Then, she froze and a message box appeared above her head.

Quest: The Foxy Family.

Objective: Rescue Marlina's family from the lair of Venomous, the Spider Queen.

Marlena and all family members must live and safely reach the drop off zone in order for party to receive credit for this quest.

Do you accept the quest?

"We can say no?" Hal asked.

"You can," Madison called back.

"We should do it, right?" Paul said. "Based on what we know about experience and all that?"

"I hate spiders," Hal said, "but, yes."

Eric clicked **Accept**.

Marlena unfroze. "Thank you. Thank you," she said, hopping up and down, clapping. She looked up at Grant, her eyes wide with admiration. "I'll show you the way." She took Grant's hand and started to lead him to the door.

Grant would have pulled his hand away. He didn't like this creature leeching onto him, but at the same time he was starting to kind of take a shine to her. Back in the real world, Madison and Kim pumped more endorphins into his system and his discomfort at the hand holding faded, replaced by a feeling of warmth and well-being.

"Hold it," Eric said. "Hold it."

Marlena stopped. She looked up at Grant for direction. "Just wait a second," Grant said.

"We need to talk about strategy." Eric considered. "Party order, how to respond to any wandering monsters that might come along. That kind of thing."

"You're boring as hell." Paul cracked his knuckles. "Let's just go and mess shit up."

Eric's temples pounded. "One does not simply walk..."

Hal, who'd been getting sick of Eric acting like he was the boss, decided to side with Paul. "Save it, nerd. I'm the detect traps guy, and I'm going." He headed toward the door.

Paul gave Eric a smirk and followed. Grant, still holding Marlana's hand, followed as well. Marlana looked at Eric and said, "you're not the boss of us" in a sassy voice.

"You're a bunch of idiots," Eric snapped. "Stupid. Stupid." It was the same way he talked to his computer when he was gaming or hacking. In fact, prior to his incarceration, Eric had very little interaction with actual people. He spent hours and hours in the dark, blasting metal and punk, as he either solo gamed or worked on a big hack.

The party gone, Eric sat down the floor and murmured "If it breaths, it sucks." He'd made that his official slogan, and he spent a great deal of time thinking about all the things he hated because they sucked: government, corporations, religion, atheism, communes, yoga studios, drum circles.... He hated everything, and he'd been cycling through that list when he'd hacked into the account of Happy Plant, a fake non-profit supposedly dedicated to saving the environment but actually a bunch of hypocrites, and he'd made a mistake as he'd stolen a million crypto coins.

Which had landed him in jail. He'd thought it would be fun to go this VR thing, but of course it turned out to suck. "Can I solo?" He asked. "I'm not a team player."

"One of the things you need to learn is how to be a team player," Madison said. "Also, that calling people idiots is not an effective form of persuasion."

Eric groaned.

"Also," Kim added, "your chances of survival as a level 3 solo wizard are close to zero. So, you can stick with your superior act and die, or you can show us how smart you are by getting with the program."

Eric got up and headed out into the hall, hurrying to catch up with the group.

Torches spaced along the hallway provided some light. He couldn't even see Hal, and he noticed right away that Grant and the little girl were in front of Paul, who was lumbering along, shouting, "Fee, fie fo fum" his deep voice echoing along the hall.

Eric hurried past Paul and took up a position next to Grant and Marlana. "Get lost," Grant said.

"Get lost," Marlana repeated. "We don't like you."

Eric grimaced and forced himself to do what he needed to do. "Look, I'm sorry I snapped back there"

Grant wasn't ready to just let it go, but he kept a neutral expression. It was a start. He'd seen Eric around back in the real world, and the skinny little runt had rubbed him the wrong way from the beginning. There was a constant sour look on his face, and he came across as an arrogant

asshole even in the way he walked. More than once, Grant had struggled with the urge to punch him just for that look on his face, but, you know, being in prison and all.

"We good?" Eric asked.

We're not in prison now, Grant thought. "You're lucky I don't kick your ass."

Eric resisted the urge to chuckle at the tiny little elf girl.

Grant saw the amusement dancing in the other man's eyes. He let go of Marlena's hand, reached back and punched Eric in the ribs. 'Ow!' He felt an intense shock of pain rattle his slender arm.

"Hey," Eric said, even more amused because he barely felt the punch. He'd also seen Grant around and had always resented the big lunkhead who, in his assessment, sucked. Seeing him reduced to a tiny little female? That was finally something that didn't suck. He'd tried connecting with the man, maybe he would need a different approach. That thought was stymied by Madison's next action.

"One demerit," Madison called. "Use your words, Divinity."

"He's being a jerk," Grant shouted back.

"You need to learn to solve conflicts without violence."

As Grant got upset, he found his breathing growing faster. The corset forced him to breath from his chest, which in turn sent his breasts heaving in a dramatic fashion, like the heroine from a Victorian romance novel.

Eric's eyes dropped to Grant's tumultuous cleavage. He couldn't help it.

Grant seethed and was about to kick him in the knee, but Marlena stepped between them and shoved Eric. "You're being rude. One does not stare."

Eric looked away.

"Why doesn't he get a demerit for being a turd?" Grant asked.

"Don't worry about anyone else's behavior and demerits. Worry about your own." Madison and Kim conferred. "There it is," Kim said. "Criminals are all emotionally immature. It's like dealing with children. It's part of their criminal mindset, as much as they don't realize it."

Madison had her eyes on the screen tracking Hal, who had gotten a little far ahead, ignoring the drama. Her eyes narrowed. The party was about to be forced into another learning experience.

Hal could hear the bickering echoing from down the hall and was glad to be away from it. It reminded him of his parents when he was growing up. They were always either staring glassy eyed at the television or arguing about something. He didn't want to deal with it then, and he didn't want to deal with it now. He'd run away, if you could even call it that, when he was 16. He didn't know if his parents had ever noticed he was missing.

Wait, he thought, pausing. What's that? The hallway sloped downward ahead, so he couldn't see very much what was ahead of him. He saw a shadow rise above the slope, a small little conical shape. Squinting into the flickering light, he realized it was a mouse. It sniffed at the air, whiskers twitching, and then began to move toward him, whiplike tail swishing from side to side. Hal still hadn't really gotten with the interface idea and forgot he could click on things to find out what they were. He watched the mouse with some sense of caution but not much. It was so small.

The mouse came right up to him. It had black fur and tiny black eyes. It rose up on its back legs and sniffed him. It had buck teeth more like he would expect to see on a beaver. "Hey, little guy," Hal said.

The mouse screeched, and then leapt in the air, latching onto his nose. "Gah!" Hal shouted, pain shooting through his body. As he grabbed at what was actually a baby giant rat, he saw another much bigger rat running from the darkness... and another... and another... The rat biting his nose was latched on tight, and Hal tried to crush it with his hands, then turned, running back toward the others.

Paul and the group watched, not moving. "Damn." Paul hefted his hammer as he watched the swarm of rats leap onto Hal's back, climb up his legs, the man screaming, thrashing. "Should we help him?"

Back in the real world, Madison shook her head. "Yes, you should help him."

"Fine." Paul charged down the hall, bellowing.

Grant really didn't care at all about Hal, but he wanted to level up, so he cast shield on Paul and ran behind, Marlena in tow.

"Plan?" Eric said. "Maybe a plan would be good?" Oh well. He wanted to level as well, so he chased after the others. A magic missile wouldn't do much against a mob, so he looked into his inventory instead and got an idea.

Paul ran up and slammed his hammer down in the ground at Hal's feet, crushing a few of the rats. They were the size of small dogs. More swarmed onto him, running up the handle on his hammer, climbing up his legs. They tried to bite him, but the shield spell protected him. They did not protect him, however, from the fact he found having rats crawling all over his body

disgusting. Dropping his hammer he started snatching at the rats, yanking them from his body and hurling them against the wall.

“Stay back,” Grant shouted at Marlena. Checking Hal’s stats, he saw the man was down to just 2 hit points. The healing hands thing sucked, but he had no choice. He waded into the mass of rats and placed his hands on Hal, casting heal even as he felt the rats climbing his legs, biting and biting.

Kim tapped some keys. Grant felt a sudden all-consuming terror overtake him. He screamed. “Help!” Tears rolled down his cheeks. The feeling of the tiny little rat hands on his skin and the



soft fur of their bellies against his leg disgusted him and horrified him even more than their biting teeth.

Marlena growled and attacked, fangs and claws slashing.

As the shield spell faded, Paul felt the teeth of the rats ripping at his flesh. All three struggled as the rats swarmed over them, climbing onto their heads and biting at their eyes.

And then the rats all began to scream and leap off them, the whole pack flowing away... away... away...

"Yah! Yah!" Eric shouted, swinging a flaming torch in a great arc as he advanced. The rats retreated from the flame, but kept their beady little eyes on him, ready to attack again if given the chance. Eric hurled the flask of oil he'd found in his inventory at the ceiling, and it shattered, raining oil over the rat pack. He tossed the torch and the pack burst into flames, screaming, running but dying. The smell of burning rat flesh filled the air.

Intense heavy metal music began to thunder, guitars screaming, drums thundering. A hoarse, man's voice like a barbarian in a movie, made an announcement:

Wizard has levelled up. New Spell Slot Received. New achievements: Pyro Maniac. Lord of the Barbecue.

"Yes!" Eric said. Checking his stat sheet, he saw he now had more mana and hit points. Plus, space for another spell. This one level four.

Hal and Paul looked on in disgust, their bodies bleeding. Of course, the know-it-all a-hole had to be the one to level. "How come he gained a level, and I didn't?" Paul shouted.

"He killed more rats," Madison replied.

Grant turned away, ashamed of how he'd reacted, tears rolling down his cheeks. I'm screaming and crying just like a woman, he thought, consumed with shame. One glance at a crushed rat body and the feelings of terror returned. He was scared of rats now. Terrified. Marlena hugged him, and he felt a surge of relief.

"How about a little healing?" Paul said, looking down at his bleeding arm, torn and shredded in a dozen different places. He puked, as usual. "Or, you just gonna sit there?"

"She will heal you in good time," Marlena said in an imperious tone. "Be patient, ogre."

Grant grinned. He was beginning to like the little fox girl more and more. He healed himself first, watching in wonder as the bite wounds just seemed to fade away, replaced once more by

smooth, perfect skin. The pain faded, too. He took a deep breath, breasts heaving, and wiped his tears away.

When Grant turned back to face the group, the men all saw his red eyes, and they knew he'd been crying. None of the others said anything. They felt embarrassed for him, having heard him screaming. He isn't much of a man, Paul thought. Was he always such a-- girl?

Grant went to Hal, who'd taken the worst of it. He lay on his back, groaning, his face torn to shreds. Grant lay his hands and cast his spell, once more feeling a rush of pleasure as the wounds on Paul's body closed and vanished.

The formerly groaning and wounded man sat up. "Wow," he said. "That's better than cocaine." Their eyes met. Hal said, "thanks" even as he felt butterflies. Yes, it was partly the work of the ladies back in the lab, but it was also primal. Being healed by a beautiful woman was a natural aphrodisiac.

Grant pulled away, blushing. He wished he could heal these guys without all the awkward feels. He made his way back to Paul. "One comment and I let you suffer, got that, ogre?"

"Yeah. Yeah." Paul closed his eyes as he felt the healing power flowing through him. Grant's hands were so soft, and once more imagined what it would be like to kiss those pillowy lips.

"Everyone okay?" Eric asked, having come back to the group.

The three looked at him. Paul shook his head. "How could we be okay when we're idiots?"

"We're all stupid, remember?" Hal said.

Eric sighed. "I apologize. I was wrong."

"Wizards are always such know it alls," Marlana said.

It broke the tension. They all laughed. Hal relented, though it wasn't because he much cared about Eric's apology or even thought it was sincere. He had another reason. "That bit with the torch was pretty bad ass, bro."

"I do have to admit that," Grant said. "How did you know they were scared of fire?"

"It's from years of gaming," Eric said, trying to keep from sounding arrogant about it. "That's all. There are things that are pretty much true in every game—rats are scared of fire, orcs smell bad. I've spent a lot of hours gaming, and this world so far actually seems exactly like a game called Allmyth."

"So, you're a super nerd," Grant said.

“Yes,” Eric answered, resisting an urge to get defensive about it, hoping to find some way to fit in with the group. “I am a super nerd, and my nerd level knowledge of fantasy games is at your disposal.”

“Fantasy games?” Hal asked.

“Yeah. Wizards and dragons and all that.”

“My idea of fantasy games is more like a bottle of baby oil and Divinity here in a teddy,” Paul said. He imagined just that, the image of the busty blonde elf, kneeling in front of him, a naughty smile on that pretty face. He grimaced and chuckled as his imagination played out the scene.



Grant's body cringed. He not only knew what Paul was thinking, he felt what the man was thinking in every inch of his soft, female flesh.

“Don't be rude,” Marlana said walking right up to Paul and planting her hands on her hips. “She is a priestess of Bisandria, not a common wench. You will treat her with respect.”

Paul laughed. “Little girl, I...”

Marlena barred her fangs and growled. There was actually something slightly terrifying when she went into feral fox girl mode.

Paul sat back. “Okay. Okay. Got it.”

Marlena returned to cute mode and curled up on the floor, leaning against Grant.

Grant was satisfied to see

Paul shut down, but he also felt his anger building. Paul should be the one trapped as a woman,

he thought, looking with envy at the man's bulging muscles, broad shoulders. The guy pukes every time he kills something. What a wimp. Yet, I'm the one stuck with tits. I'd be a much better brick if only... he looked at his tiny hand, slender wrist... It's probably payback for ... for... He closed his eyes and tried not to remember.

They all sat for a few moments, catching their breath, processing. Eric resisted his urge to make any suggestions. He'd decided to sit back and just try his best to be a part of the group. Once more, Hal took the lead in his own way. "I gotta say, and this does not make you the leader, but maybe the idea of having some sort of plan for how we go along is a good idea."

"Yeah," Paul said. "After all."

Eric sat up. Well maybe this was going to be okay after all. He kept his desire to gloat and say I told you so in check. "I can share my experience, and we should decide these things as a group, right?"

They all agreed.

"Typically, in a game like this, the thief goes first checking for traps and scouting ahead for monsters, just as you did." He gave Hal a thumbs up. The other man responded with a small nod. "Then, the brick should be best since he's the best fighter, along with me, the magic user, followed by the healer." He looked at the fox girl. "You stay with Divinity."

"Duh?" The girl said.

Grant asked, "why me?" He knew very well why, but he didn't like being put into another of what he considered girl jobs. Babysitter. Me? He'd never really liked children.

"I mean..." the guys' eyes all dropped to his breasts. They each made the cupping gesture men liked to use to indicate a woman's breasts.

Grant felt his jaw tighten. Idiots, he thought. Women are right. We're idiots. He needed to take a stand. "Just because I have, because I look like..."

Marlena settled the matter. "You're a girl," she said. "taking care of children is your job." She made the same cupping gesture. "That's why you have boobs." She looked at the men. "No offense, but I wouldn't trust any of you with a kitten, let alone an actual child."

"No... none taken..." the guys murmured, nodding in agreement. "I couldn't keep a cactus alive," Hal said.

Grant seethed and gave a dirty look at the ceiling. He knew that was Madison talking. Did they know he used to say the same thing to his ex-wife whenever she complained about him not changing diapers? Had they been interviewing people from his past?



Kim, watching the scene, enjoyed everything that was happening to Grant. He was her pet project. "I wonder if he knows how hot he looks?" She whispered. Perched on platform, stiletto heels and lovingly corseted, he had no choice to stand in a manner one could only call provocative, with his chest out and his ass back.

"I think he'd have gone insane if he knew, or if he could even see himself walk now," Madison said. "Better he come to awareness of some things gradually." She looked at it more clinically, curious as to how being forced to even stand in a feminine manner at all times could be impacting his neuro-pathways. Of course, they would not be able to be certain how much of the changes they expected would come from environment and how much from the fact they were bathing his brain in female hormones.

The breeze tossed the little elf girl's hair across her eyes and Grant was once more forced to brush it back, adding the feminine essence of his body language. And you thought you were so tough just because you were bigger and stronger than everyone else, didn't you? She thought, remembering back to how she'd brought him to tears, made him scream like a little girl when the rats attacked. The next time he saw even so much as a mouse, he'd be like a stereotypical woman from some 1950s cartoon, screaming in terror. It was for his own good, she thought, and the good of society.



Back in the dungeon....

“What if something sneaks up behind the girls?” Hal asked. “Maybe you should be in the back?”

“She has enhanced hearing, so it’s very hard for anything to sneak up on her. I need a clear line of sight to cast my magic missiles.”

Grant seethed. He hated the shes and hers, but he was also getting tired of arguing about it. Besides, he sounded ridiculous insisting he was a man with his little girl voice.

Hal considered and then nodded. “Makes sense.”

“It would also make sense for us to discuss the other items that were behind that secret door.”

Hal, now starting to buy into the team aspect of the game, agreed. He showed the other items to the group. There was a potion of healing and another of cure poison as well as a Scroll of Fireball.

The group actually looked to Eric, as they were learning he did, in fact, have a good sense about these things. “I suggest Hal keep the potions of healing and cure poison. Divinity already has healing, and you’re the most likely to need poison if your detect traps fails.”

“The scroll? Fireball sounds really cool.” Everyone wanted the scroll, and it might have become another flashpoint but Eric raised a hand.

“Check it, so you’ll know I’m not lying when I say I’m the only one who can use it.”

The whole group checked the scroll and confirmed it was only usable by a wizard. Hal transferred the scroll over to Eric.

With that matter sorted, they all checked the timer:

Time to leave level one and meet goal: 10:32

“We should probably get to the quest,” Grant said. He, more than any of them, felt an intense desire to get through the game as soon as possible, for obvious reasons.

“Yes,” Marlena said. “I’m growing impatient with your babbling.”

The whole group chuckled. The imperious little fox was growing on all of them.

“I wonder if there are more rats?” Hal said, checking his inventory. “I do have some oil flasks and a few torches just in case.”

Grant put a hand to one of his soft cheeks, his heart racing at even the suggestion of more rats. Get it together, he thought, once more brushing his hair from his face. His dagger was made for stabbing, or he would have chopped it off himself. As it was, he didn’t want to ask the guys—the other guys—for help, so he just decided he would deal with it for now.

“I wish we had a map,” Eric said, really to himself. “We could...”

“I have a map,” Marlena said.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

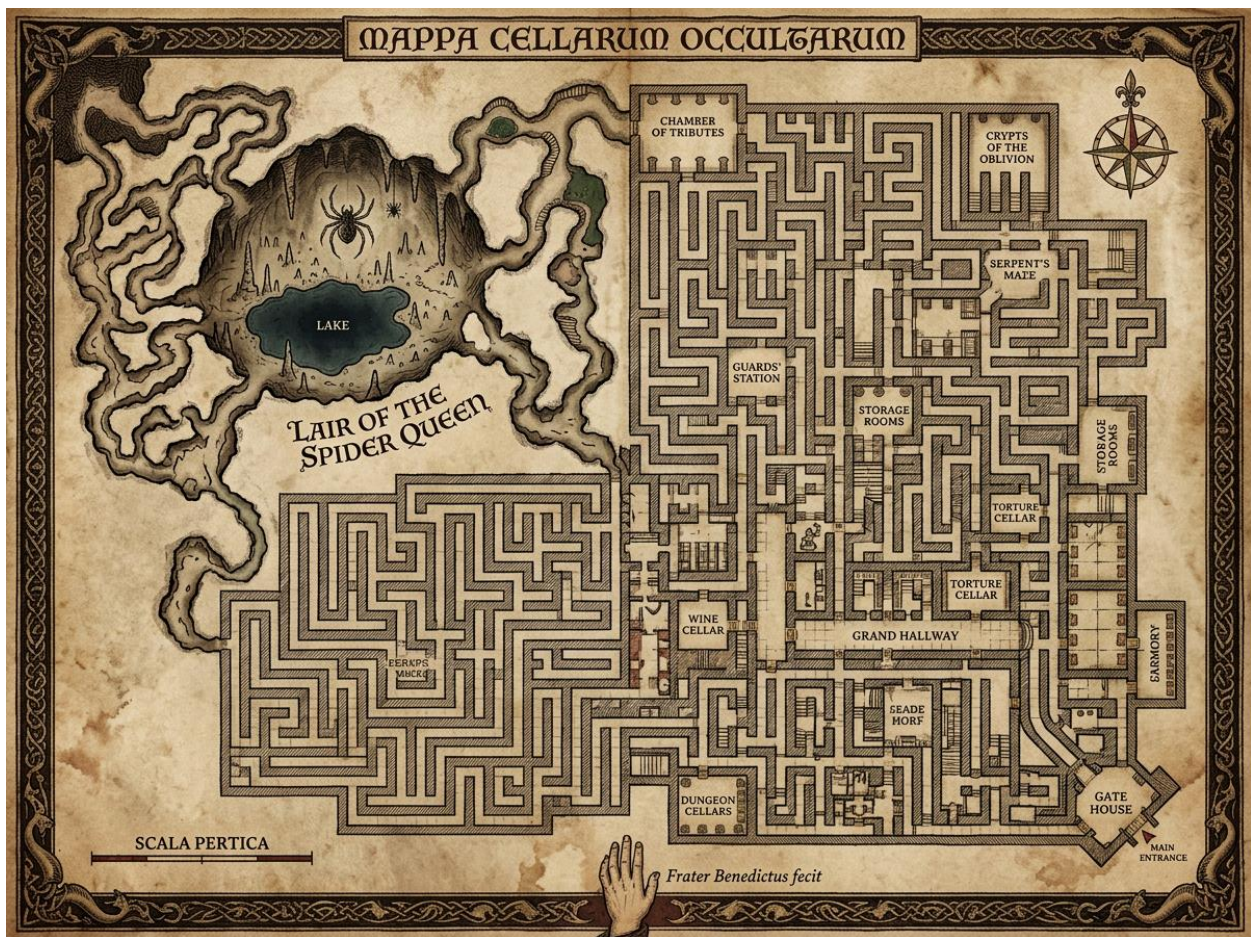
“You didn’t ask.”

Marlena pulled a tattered, yellow piece of parchment from her inventory, but at the same time a map appeared floating in the air above her.

The map showed the whole of level one. An irregularly shaped room like a large cave was marked as “Spider Queen Lair.” It appeared to include a small lake or pond, with a plateau in the center. They would have to pass through a series of twisty tunnels and smaller caves.

“What’s the scale on this map?” Paul asked.

“How should I know?” Marlena said. “I’m just a little kid.”



They all looked at the map. Hal, Grant and Paul all said, “wine cellar” in unison. Eric’s temples began to pound. He started to explain that they really couldn’t afford to waste time, that getting drunk was probably a fatal mistake. Then, he remembered, Team player. He took a deep breath and said, “wine cellar it is.”