

Howdy all my HP Fans. With the end of ATP over on my Patty on, I have decided to shift how I organize my polls. They are now going to be organized along fandom lines, HP and Ranma. And one surprise, which I will post here tomorrow... Anyway, that means this fic, FILFy Teacher (which will be updated in August) and Fate Touched will be in one poll, which means this fic needed to be updated to where it was over on patty on. That poll will show up here in the second half of September, but as always, if you want to have more say in what fics are updated and how quickly, head over and sign up.

Chapter 13: Revelations

Due to misuse of blood mage spells, you were rendered unconscious and near death.

Remember, great power comes with great cost.

You have been healed. You are no longer suffering the unconscious status effect.

Groaning, Harry almost physically waved away the two messages that were filling his vision for a moment, blotting out the last message he had seen before succumbing to the weird pseudo-death state he had fallen into. While he hadn't realized what it would feel like if he pushed himself to zero health via his Blood Mage spells, it wasn't as if he hadn't known what he was doing.

Ugh, that was a weird experience, like I could still kind of think, but was also almost in some kind of suspended, out of body thing, only not at the same time because all I could see was red everywhere. Not a red something, but just red period. Like someone had painted my eyeballs red... and I have no idea where that image came from. Rgg... thinking hard... And wait, wasn't I also bleeding out? Fucking AAS, this wasn't all me!

Harry tried to sit up, but a small, but a callused feminine hand on his forehead kept him in place, pressing down.

"Sit still Harry, my Cure Minor Wounds spell might've brought you back from the brink, but you are still in no fit condition to move just yet." Jaheira's voice came from his left. He moved his head slightly to one side, where Jaheira sat on her haunches beside him. "Luckily for us beyond using a Cure Serious Wounds on you and another on Minsc during the battle, I have healing spells to spare on you and our other wounded."

The next healing spell washed over him, and Harry felt instantly better, his mind clearing. Taking a glance up at his heads up display, he noticed that he was still deep in the red. Evidently, that had been another Cure Minor Wounds rather than one of Jaheira's more high level healing spells. But that was all right, as hopefully Harry wouldn't need to toss around spells or rush into battle anytime soon.

Raising a hand Harry gripped Jaheira's, squeezing it gently. "Thank you for the healing, both now and what kept be alive near the end of that fight. I'm not looking forward to dying, even if it might not have been the permanent variety. But what about Khalid?" Harry could see the other half elf from where he lay, and the heavily armored warrior was laying unmoving on the ground nearby, and Harry remembered seeing Khalid going down. Minsc was also there, standing over Dynaheir, who was equally unmoving.

Two officers of the city watch were moving around the room behind him. Harry could not see Vai from his current position, but supposed she was around the place somewhere.

"... My husband alas will need to be revived. Thankfully, he took no further head damage in this battle, only a blow through the neck," Jaheira said, attempting to make a joke, but only coming out as sounding wan and very worried, not just for husband, but for the rest of them as she looked down at her hands. When she looked backed up at Harry, she slowly shook her head, her voice a whisper so as to be unheard by the officers nearby. "Khalid, Dynaheir and Viconia will all need to be revived. Unlike my husband, Vicki did not die from a single blow. She bled out, much like Dynaheir. Viconia and I just could not concentrate on healing the party as much as we should have. We should have done more."

She turned her attention away, still gently holding Harry's hand as she stared up the stairs towards where Brandy's body lay. "All three of them will be able to be brought back by a competent priest. But Brandy? I am afraid she is lost permanently."

"I saw," Harry said, his voice sounding a little raw to his own ears, and not entirely from a byproduct of how close he had come to death or the strange life draining effect of his Blood Mage abilities. "I saw her head get hit by an acid arrow spell. No one could bring her back from that."

"It is good that you acknowledge that at least. And now I am worried that you will start blaming yourself for her death," Jaheira said, turning her attention back to him pulling her hand away from his, using another Cure Minor Wounds spell on him.

Harry supposed she was waiting for the others to be revived before using the more advanced versions of that spell beyond the two she'd already used. *Or she is perhaps thinking we might have trouble coming again.*

"I probably will later," Harry admitted. "I led us into this ambush. I thought we were ready, I thought that Vai and her officers would come through for us. I didn't think they'd be so prepared, let alone..."

"You are thinking too critically of yourself" Jaheira intoned grimly, shaking her head and smacking Harry very lightly on the top of his head. "Without you and Imoen, we would none of us be walking away from this battle at all. You are correct that we did not anticipate that they would be ready for us to this extent. Perhaps we should have," she acknowledged Harry's point before dismissing it entirely. "But it is a mistake that any leader could have made. Learn from it,

and move on, as myself and Viconia will have to with our own poor performance. Mourn the dead, but do not let their deaths make you hesitant or lose yourself in introspection.”

For a moment Harry fell silent as he stood up, grunting only a little as he pushed himself to his feet taking in more of what was going on around him, seeing Imoen by Viconia’s body... and Vai standing beside Imoen on Viconia’s other side.

Fuck. Shaking that off for a second, Harry concentrated back on Jaheira. “I suppose I should listen to the voice of experience than,” he teased lightly, winking at her.

Jaheira rolled her eyes, although Harry also saw her lips twitch into a smile. “As if I hadn’t heard that one before. I’m a half-elf, it comes with the territory being more experienced than everyone around you. And if you are well enough to crack jokes, I will turn my attention to our fellows.”

“If you could? Try to get Minsc, Edwin, Imoen and yourself back into some semblance of fighting shape,” Harry finished in a whisper. Someone had pulled Vicki’s hood over her head, but while that might have saved Viconia’s heritage from being discovered by the two new city watch in the room, Vai was now staring between Viconia’s body and the now-standing Harry, her eyes narrowed in anger.

As he glanced in her direction, Harry’s Greater Observation skill kicked in.

Name: Officer Vai

Gender: Female human

Attitude towards you: wariness, suspicion, guilt, worry, anger, hate.

While grateful for the fact that you uncovered what amounted to a somewhat large, experienced gang linked to the ongoing troubles along the Sword Coast hiding in her town and saved her own life during the recent battle, Vai is now extremely wary of you. The hatred and fear of the drow race is a very real, very powerful thing throughout all of Faerun. Knowing that you are traveling with one has greatly impacted her opinion of you, your actions, and her willingness to work with you. Only the guilt Vai is feeling from being so useless in this fight is keeping her silent at the moment, and that may change soon.

You are now a Drow Lover in her mind.

Hatred and suspicion, not a good combination, Harry thought grimly. We might be faced with another battle soon. And we’re not in any shape for it, or the outcome after that.

To his mind, it was an easy equation. Viconia was a friend, part of his party. If he had to defend her or their association from Vai or anyone else in this town, he would do so. She had proved herself, and while Harry was not blind to the concerns about the drow race, he’d read histories that dictated their wars or acts of atrocity when interacting with the high elves in

particular, he wasn't blind to the fact that such hatred and fear could all too easily lead into simple bigotry.

Jaheira glanced in the direction he was looking and winced a bit. She seemed to open her mouth for a moment, then hesitated, shrugged, and murmured, "It does you credit that you're willing to stand up for your fellows. Hopefully the fact that Viconia is already dead and awaiting revival will negate some of the officers anger at Viconia's place among us."

Even as she said that though, Jaheira was turning away, moving towards Edwin. He had situated himself in a corner, leaning into the wall, his own hood pulled up over his head, his hands together in a almost prayerful fashion in front of him as he contemplated the rest of the room. But Harry knew the man well enough to tell his current pose wasn't a prayerful one at all. Instead, it probably meant he was ready to start casting at a moments notice. *And I don't even need my Greater Observation skill to tell that. Hopefully we won't need him, but good to know he's ready for trouble.*

Moving towards Vai, Harry decided to go on the offensive before she could even speak, the better to knock her off balance. "Where the hell were your men!?" He growled, poking her in the armored sternum so hard his finger began to hurt. This caused Vai to stumble back, and he continued angrily. "Your men were supposed to come in from the back as soon as they heard the sound of conflict or your whistle. And don't tell me these walls are so thick they couldn't hear anything! They should have been joining the battle by the time you fell into that trap on the stairs."

Vai grimaced a bit, looking away, her anger fading for a moment as Harry threw her people's shortcomings into her face. "They would have, but evidently, this gang had even more resources than they showed in this fight. They had two golems in their backyard. Simple clay ones, but they still killed a lot of my men out there. Seven in total! That's a full third of the total forces of the town guard, and only four of them will be able to be revived."

She shook her head, then tried to go on the attack herself. "Besides, while they might've sprung a few surprises on us, you had your own surprises, didn't you? I thought you were a paladin, and I know paladins can't duel class, so what were those spells you and the thief threw out?" She practically hissed, glaring at him. "To say nothing of a certain companion of yours?"

At that, her tone turned action actually biting, and Harry saw one hand fall to her short sword, while the other gestured viciously if clandestinely towards where Viconia's body lay. "You're accompanied by a, a drow! I should run you all in right now!"

"My skills are a secret, one that I need to keep so in order to make certain they have an impact like they did in this fight." Harry shrugged his shoulders. "If I had thought this would go so pear-shaped, I might have told you of them before we entered the mansion and gotten a vow on your part to keep them secret." He paused, then went on grimly. "Just like I will require from you now, about them and about Viconia. She might be a drow, but Viconia is also on the run

from her own people, an outcast among them because she saw the evil and sophistry of their society for what it was.”

Vai scoffed. “Please! She’s a drow! They are born evil! She probably told you some kind of sob story, batted her eyelashes, maybe showed a bit of skin. And suddenly the drow cunt has you all convinced that she’s some kind of redemption project. Frankly, it’s better for all concerned if we simply let her stay dead.”

“Make one move towards her, and I’ll have your head off your shoulders,” Harry answered grimly, moving slightly to the side to block Vai’s view of Viconia, and also crowding her very slightly back away from her fellows. It wasn’t exactly the act of a paladin, but Harry refused to even countenance what Vai had just suggested, and judging by the look on her face, Vai was seriously considering doing just that. Or worse, announcing Viconia’s presence and letting the mob do her work for her.

Vai backed away, looking startled, then the anger came back. But before she could speak, Harry continued. “Without Viconia and her healing magic, neither you nor I would be alive right now. And without my party, you would never have discovered these people in the first place! What do you think would’ve happened when eventually they moved against Beregost as part of their overall plot? What do you think your mayor or the rest of the townsfolk would think if they understood how badly you and the guard had failed them? Letting a seemingly high-ranking member of the conspiracy to cause war on the Sword Coast simply live here in town, with no one the wiser? And hell, even if you had discovered them, could you have done anything about them with just your guards? It doesn’t sound like it.”

Persuasion(?) Check passed.

You have convinced (intimidated) Vai into understanding her position is nowhere near as solid as she might’ve thought. She is deeply in your debt for discovering this portion of the conspiracy that has rapidly attempted to turn the Sword Coast into a battlefield.

Not knowing that Harry could see the fact she had come around to his point of view, Vai blustered, “You, we might be in debt to you, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to let another snake into our town like a drow!”

“You will, because you owe Viconia personally. She was the one that sent a healing spell your way after you were trapped on the steps. That allowed you to stay alive for the rest of the fight.” At that, Harry almost absentmindedly noted that he had just passed another persuasion check with Vai, who acknowledged the fact that she probably did owe her life to ‘the hated drow’. “But I am not entirely heartless, nor blind to the position that might put you in if her presence ever comes to light. And I know that any promise I make to try and keep that presence under wraps wouldn’t matter much to you, would it?”

Vai scoffed, but a lot of her anger had disappeared. According to Greater Observation, she was still incredibly wary, and distrustful of Harry, but was at least willing to hear him out for now. That was good enough.

“So how about we make a deal?” Harry gestured to the guards currently dragging bodies toward the door. Harry had no doubt they, and maybe Imoen, had already gone through their pockets. “You agree to keep my secret, you agree to keep Viconia’s heritage a secret, and my party and I will stay in Beregost and help out the watch for three months. During that time, any money we earn on quests we will share half with the guard. We will take any quests the guard have around the place for free. Even investigation type quests, although those we would have to be more selective about, considering our party. And we bind this agreement with an oath.”

Vai’s eyes widened at that, but then narrowed in speculation, her gaze flashing over each of the party members in thought.

Meanwhile, another pop-up appeared in front of his face.

Warning: Oaths are not something you can do lightly, in particular as a paladin!

The gods are watching, and the one thing most gods have in common is they are judgmental.

Your attempt to use a Sworn Oath as a way to make a binding transaction puts this oath somewhat beyond the normal Triad’s purview, as does the way you are enforcing it on yourself, using your Blood Magic to bind your magic to the agreement. Mystra is known to like deals, but don’t take it too far...

If you continue, and then break this Oath, the consequences may be extremely **DIRE** for you and your party.

Harry snorted at that, but took the words seriously. He had seen notifications of this sort before, and understood that what he was doing here **was** very dangerous. *Manipulating the Oath system on this world and my own magic is like trying to stick to the letter of the law but not the heart of it. Although I’ve not seen that specific warning about Mystra before. That’s not good, to put it mildly.*

Mystra was the lady of magic, and all magic lay under her domain, all of it, including the background Weave of the universe, from which all magic native to this realm came from. That made her insanely powerful, although there were rumors even back in Candlekeep that she had died in the Time of Troubles, and then been replaced by a human woman raised to godhood. Or perhaps a fragment of Mystra had survived her battle with Helm at the Gates to Ao’s realm and taken the woman, Midnight, over. Who knew? But there was a reason why belief in Helm had fallen since then, while Mystra had somehow survived, her worshippers not diminished at all.

It was well known that Mystra was very territorial when it came to magic, oftentimes dealing harshly with those who attempted to manipulate the Weave in ways she did not

approve of. There was also something else there, something about Mystra and other gods that Harry had read once in Candlekeep. But even with Gamer's Mind, Harry's memory wasn't eidetic, and he couldn't bring it to mind.

And now that it came to it, Harry realized with something like an epiphany that Mystra must be aware of his and 'Tonks's' special status in this world. If she wasn't involved somehow in their being there in the first place. That brought up a lot of questions Harry wasn't certain he wanted to know the answers to.

But frankly this battle had also shown him something: that all of them needed to level up. *Well, bar Jaheira and Khalid anyway. Unfortunately, with the Curse of the Dread One over them, neither of them will be leveling up anytime soon, if ever.*

Yet it was readily apparent that they were going to start running into battles, or perhaps even single enemies who could overcome the party. *Hells, if Tranzig had two more fighters like that man in full plate we would have died here and quickly. And full plate armor isn't all that rare.* Like Jaheira had said, only Harry and Imoen's Blood Mage spells have allowed them to win this fight. And the more they came to rely on that hidden ace, the more the party would be in trouble if they ran into an enemy who could adapt to such a surprise, or who had somehow learned of their powers. *No, it's time to grind some levels. Or at least that's what Imoen called it back in Candlekeep when describing how I used the time loop there to gain further skills and so forth. And at least this time around it won't be so boring.*

As Harry had been thinking deep thoughts about the warning he'd just seen while also dismissing it's portents, Vai had been thinking of the deal he was offering her. Now she nodded. "I... Agree. None of my folks saw your Drow's skin color. I was able to cover her up before I called them in because I wanted answers from you first. I'm not exactly happy at the answers I've been given, but I never would've been anyway. And I have to admit this deal sounds pretty good from my perspective given our losses today."

Vai grimaced at that, shaking her head. She clapped her hands once, and ordered the two other guards in the room who had been moving the bodies of the dead towards the door to head back outside. She would join them in a moment, and they would transfer their own dead and wounded back to their barracks, where she would have to organize getting the bodies to the nearest temple for revivification. "As for the dead criminals, leave them where they are for now. We'll take them for burning later."

At that, a sudden thought seemed to cross her mind, with Greater Observation telling Harry,

Something about the orders she just gave has amused Vai to push past her lingering wariness about you. She still doesn't like you much, and your ardent defense of Viconia has earned you a bit of contempt in her eyes, as internally she still thinks of you as a "Drow Lover". But so long as

she keeps that appellation to herself, it will not spread and therefore stick to you. Regardless, something is amusing her now, something that she is in no rush to share.

This was strangely followed up by another message. It was a warning, but it was probably one that was further tied into his Greater Observation skills.

Warning: the appellation ‘Drow Lover’ would have a major impact on your reputation with those around you, creating a long term negative status.

Your ability to move around without interference from the locals, what deals they would be willing to offer you on goods and services, and how well your word would be believed among the public would all be negatively affected. This would be especially impactful for you as a paladin.

Be very careful. The automatic hatred for the drow is a very well-founded one, and few people are willing to look beyond it to see those exceedingly few examples of drow who are not completely evil.

Harry had seen something like that before and understood that he would be treading on very thin ground in many ways while Viconia traveled with them. But the upside was simply too good to pass up, and Harry wasn't just talking about Viconia's healing skills.

As soon as the guards were gone, Vai moved back to Harry, holding out her hand and the two of them exchanged the oath that Harry had offered. The exact wording took them a few seconds to work out, but with Edwin stepping in to help, his lips twisting into a rise smile of acknowledgment at Harry's intelligent move, they eventually were able to do it, and the notification for the oath given popped up in Harry's face even as he reeled from the cost to his health.

You have given your Magically enforced Oath to help the guards of Beregost in various ways for three months.

In return Officer Vai has vowed on the name of the gods she will keep the secret of Viconia being a drow for as long as you are on the Sword Coast. This was an Oath given on the names of the Gods, and is binding. If you attempt to not fulfill your end of the bargain, to wit, remaining in Beregost for three months and working with the guards during that time, you will be punished heavily by the gods.

You have activated the Side Quest (medium): **An Oath Fulfilled:** win the ‘Respected’ title with the Mayor and Guards of Beregost.

Although few of the townsfolk wish to acknowledge it, but the people of Beregost have been in dire situations for many months now, perhaps even the entire town has been living on borrowed time. The troubles up and down the Sword Coast have made travel almost impossible, and without travel and trade, Beregost has no real reason to exist. The guards in particular are in trouble, with too many demands on their time, and too few personnel even

before the recent losses. If you can help them turn this around, both the mayor and the guard will look favorably upon you (even if Vai won't).

The respected title is a positive neutral stance. Neither the mayor nor the guard will help you on your travels, but will be willing to keep your secrets and back you up in town against other troublemakers. This will even result in an impact to the prices on both goods and information shared within the town.

Fulfill your oath, and you may receive a personal upgrade of some kind.

That last made Harry's eyes widen, although they narrowed in speculation a second later as he read the following lines.

While your defense of Viconia is something all the triad look at askance, every God who can become the patron saint of a paladin appreciates a good Oath fulfilled... Even if it was offered for a self-serving reason.

Warning: Just as you would be rewarded for fulfilling your Oath, so to will you be punished for not doing so. The punishment will be **DIRE** for you and for everyone around you.

While the possible reward was nice, seeing that the consequences of not fulfilling his oath wasn't so good. Instead, the word dire was written in blood red, almost pulsing out of the rest of the message. *Yeah, subtle is not in the AAS's vocabulary. As if I needed to be told after that earlier warning,* Harry thought woozily through the haze of pain from the Ergo Fides spell. Luckily, Jaheira was there, and a Cure Medium Wounds spell **had him back to the point where he could think and move, although Harry still felt that a particularly aggressive xvert could take him right now.**

"With that, our business is concluded for now. I need to organize an investigation of this house. If you do the same, don't move anything that looks incriminating, and for God sake, don't touch any paperwork," Vai warned. "I'll give you and your party the rest of the day off, but tomorrow morning, you'll be meeting me at the barracks for your first few missions for the guard. Don't expect them all to be simply combat missions, but also don't expect them to be easy."

She then smirked, a far wider, toothier expression than the one Edwin had worn during the exchange of oaths. "And I will note for the record, that our agreement did not cover my helping you keep anyone outside of. In particular, I don't have to intervene between you and the local priest. It will be up to him to decide if Viconia over there is worth reviving, and frankly, I doubt he will, and I doubt you'll even be able to convince him to make a house call so to speak in the first place."

With that, Vai laughed, more of a cackle really, and walked off, certain that she had just given Harry an impossible task. After all, what priest of a god of light would willingly revive a drow?

He groaned, also understanding that this would probably be very difficult. But Imoen snapped him out of his momentary depression, draping herself over his shoulders and grinning slightly. "Come on Harry! It can't be that bad, and even if it is, you'll have me along to help. If you can't just convince him to do it because it's a good idea and all lives are precious or whatever, I can charm the pants off them."

"That is both a disgusting image, as I just thought of you doing precisely that to the old priest in Nashkel, and probably sacrilegious in many ways," Harry snorted. But he was feeling much more upbeat now and thunked his head lightly against Imoen as she laid it on his shoulder. "Still, I suppose there's no time like the present. First though, use your color change spell on Viconia. Her general features will still be a bit off from a normal elves' but at least her skin color won't give the game away."

While she had the same ears and height of a normal elf (just around five feet five inches) in nearly every other way, her boy was very much not like a normal elven woman's. Elves tended to be slim of build in chest, waist, and what have you. While Viconia's legs and waist were built like that, her chest and, to a lesser extent her rear, was not. Indeed, she was the bustiest of the women in the party, even more so than Branwen. Her face was also very different to a normal elf's, slightly rounder, slightly harsher looking in some almost indefinable way.

Imoen nodded. "Yeah, I know she refused on grounds of pride before, but I suppose since she's dead and all she can't object."

Moments later however, Imoen realized that maybe something else could. The hit to her health was much larger than it should have been, and she and Harry, just them, not Minsc or Jaheira, saw another message, this one entirely gold, pulsing, and accompanied by thunderous pain for Imoen.

THE GODS ARE WATCHING, FOOLS! BE MINDFUL OF WHO PRECISELY AMONG THEM COULD BE DOING SO!

Harry took Imoen's arm quickly, as her hands rose to her head, the world swimming in front of her. "What the bloody cocking fuck does that mean!?" she hissed.

"I, I don't know..." Harry shook her head.

They quickly explained what had happened to the others, and Jaheira's eyes widened dramatically. "Oh, that's... that is most disturbing on several levels. That the gods are now aware of your ability to make such Oaths without using their names, and that Mystra has very obviously had something to do with your magic. And dislike what you tried to use it for."

"I understand it might be thanks to Mystra that I and Imoen have our Blood Magic, but why..."

"You idiot," Jaheira said, making the word both a insult and almost a term of endearment, an odd linguistic feat. "Mystra loathes Shar. She is the creator of the Shadow Weave. From what I understand it is another source of magic, one that corrupts the original?" Edwin snorted at that, waving his hand but he seemed in no rush to explain if he agreed with Jaheira's interpretation of the Shadow Weave or not. "Thus Mystra and Shar are the most brutal of enemies. If she is aware of you, then she is undoubtedly aware of your companions."

Edwin shuddered. He and Minsc had been close enough to see what happened to Imoen and had heard their explanations. And Edwin was now extremely concerned about remaining with this party. *Divine attention or the knowledge I continue to glean of Blood Magic while watching the Candlekeep siblings... Botheration. Power or self-preservation, never an easy internal debate for any wizard.* "While as a wizard I, after a fashion, to somewhat worship Mystra, I have to inform you that any direct divine awareness is not a good thing.

"Okay... so we're kind of boned if we try to use our Blood Magic to help Viconia?" Imoen grumbled.

"Perhaps only when you use spells directly on Viconia to do something positive," Edwin answered musingly. "While Mystra's current incarnation is based upon the shell of a human woman, and thus she is more willing to act than other gods, there will still be a limit to what she can do."

"Right. Well... unless any of you have a way we can talk to Mystra about this and convince her to not look our way?" Harry waited and the eyerolls he knew would be coming did, even from Minsc and Harry went on. "Then in that case, we will need to be very careful with the Ergo Fides spell from now on. But it also doesn't matter just now. We still need to go and get the priest to come back here and revive our friends."

"Oh, yeah, just ignore the fact that the literal goddess of magic is watching us. Great idea, Harry, why didn't I think of that?" Imoen grumbled. "I guess we should be happy we didn't get some kind of bitch slap from on high, a massive goddess's finger coming down to smooch us or something. And now we're off to get a priest, to come to a wizard's mansion to revive people..." She suddenly grinned, tossing off her previous annoyance like an ill fitting cloak. "Hey, that sounds like a joke of some kind, let me think..."

Jaheira watched the pair of them go for a moment, shaking her head slightly as the last thing she heard was Imoen attempting to tell Harry some kind of joke. Then she looked back down at her husband, and then around the room. "Well, it is good to see Imoen keeping Harry's spirits up. Setting aside this 'issue' with the gods being aware of him, this will be the first real loss of a comrade he has had to deal with as a leader, and it will have no doubt hurt his confidence. We will have to remind him that we all believe him to be a good leader, regardless of what happened here."

“Boo and Minsc are both of the same mind, indeed, Minsc believes Harry to be a most excellent leader, and if not for the dastardly doings of a treacherous thief, Minsc is certain Dynaheir would no doubt be alive right now and agreeing with that too.” Minsc said, trying to sound upbeat but failing until he went on, one large hand coming up to pet Boo as the hamster appeared on his shoulder from... somewhere on his person. Jaheira refused to speculate where the little creature hid during battle.

“Although I feel that Boo’s appreciation for Harry’s stems more from his cooking and then from his combat skills or leadership ability. Boo is actually getting quite rotund on the meals that Harry feeds us. It is getting so bad that Minsc might be forced to place Boo on a diet.”

Boo squeaked somewhat angrily at that, audible even from where Jaheira was standing, and Minsc shook his head. “No, Boo, diet is not simply ‘die with an extra T’. It is something that is occasionally good for you. Especially for growing giant miniature space hamsters like yourself.”

The subsequent squeaks from the miniature giant space hamster seemed to dispute that notion. Minsc’s own body also seemed to be in revolt at the very idea, a loud growl emanating from his stomach.

Nearby Edwin snorted, shaking his head and setting aside his concerns about being under Mystra’s watchful gaze. “While it pains me to agree with this barbarian on anything, I am somewhat hungry as well. This was thirsty work to say the least.” He looked at Jaheira, who huffed indignantly as the mage went on. “And as the sole woman among us, it falls upon you to provide, half-elf.”

“I am certain I can provide a proper beating if that is what it would take to get that stupid notion out of your head Thayan,” Jaheira sneered back. “I regret to tell you that my cooking skills are severely lacking. I can cure meat, treat animals, and look after soup. That is about the extent of my cooking skills.”

She pulled out a pouch, and began to hand out bits of jerky to both Edwin and Minsc saying that this would have to tie them over. Then Jaheira went back to sitting next to her husband, gently resting her hand on his armored arm as she waited for Harry to return with the priest.

That Harry would do so was not a question, despite the fact Jaheira knew most priests refused to leave their temples. *Yet Harry is very determined young man. One I am proud to call friend, although the quickness I have reached that conclusion still somewhat disturbs me despite everything we have been through... We haven’t even known one another for more than a month! And here I am, about to go even more thoroughly into his debt than I was already once he revives Khalid.* Jaheira snorted. *Although at least then I will have good company.”*

OOOOOOO

As they walked, Imoen continually tried to cheer Harry up, seeing the permanent death of Branwen bothered him a lot. It bothered Imoen too, of course. *I know I'm gonna have a good cry on this later. But I can't let it show, not now. Harry needs me to be upbeat. He's waaaay too quick to brood, especially about things he thinks could be his fault. It ain't but tell that to Harry, see how far you get.*

At first, she tried to use bad jokes, which didn't seem to work. Then Imoen switched to mentioning some of the worst things she'd ever seen Dumbledore wear during her time as a student at Hogwarts, which got a few snorts at least. By the time they reached the street leading to the lone temple here in Beregost Harry seemed to be in a much better frame of mind, and even joked back with Imoen a few times, although he steered clear of his time at Hogwarts. With all the time he had spent in the time loop, his time at Hogwarts seemed a distant memory. Not faint by any means, but simply not as important as his time at Candlekeep or in this new life.

The sight of the temple however caused Harry's frown to return. "Is it just me, or is this place insanely ostentatious?"

"It isn't just you. But, I've seen a lot of different temples and churches," Imoen said, indicating with a wave of her fingers that she didn't mean in this life but their past one. "Religions are always a little over the top, and they like showing off their wealth. This place, I... I think I've heard of it actually, back at the Friendly Arm Inn. It's supposedly one of the largest temples on the Sword Coast, and was actually here before Beregost was built. It commemorates some priest or other from hundreds of years ago. It's devoted to the Morning Lord, Lathander, so that might be a good sign too. He isn't as hidebound as Helm is, right?"

"That's true at least," Harry answered, a very faint blush appearing on his face as he remembered the bonuses he would have received if he had decided to follow Lathander, drowning out his grief at Branwen's passing. *Physical perfection and enhanced virility, eesh.*

The temple in question was indeed quite large, perhaps as large as a city block. From what Imoen and Harry could see as they walked up to it, the temple seemed to be rectangular in shape and almost designed to look like a small Norman keep, with walls pressing forward from a central square keep at the back that was built up several stories over the walls. The walls jutting forward from it then came together at the doorway the twosome was currently walking towards, containing a small open area. Through the open door, Imoen could see a series of benches set around a small pond there. There were a few people there, either sitting and talking, or kneeling and looking up at the sky above in prayer.

Mollified by Imoen's words, Harry nodded, and then he blinked, staring at the temple in thought. "Actually, come to think of it, if this place was here before the town, the size of it makes more sense if you think about it. Those walls. If you block the doors, those walls could do as makeshift balustrades, complete with matriculations."

“What?” Imoen asked, never having heard the term. “What are those when they’re at home?”

Harry pointed to a segment of the wall above them as they walked towards the entryway to the temple. At the top of the wall, a series of buttresses shot up from the top of the wall giving anyone who was on the roof cover. “If you look up between the buttresses, the roof kind of slopes there. That would allow defenders to shoot down or to drop things like burning oil or pitch down on anything attacking the temple.”

Harry’s voice echoed a bit as they walked under the outer wall, and more than a few of the churchgoers glared in his direction either for the marshal thinking or perhaps just because his voice disturbed their prayers, one of the other. While Imoen wince and made kind of half-bow in apology, Harry ignored them, moving through them, not caring about the stares the two of them were getting at all. Harry knew he was blood splattered and dirty looking from the fight, not having taken the time to clean himself up or repair his punctured armor, but there were more important things to care about right now. Imoen was also a little bedraggled, although nowhere near as colored by the blood of their enemies as Harry was.

As for Imoen, well, she dealt with being looked at like this in her normal manner, by joking about it. “You think we should use the fountain to clean ourselves off a bit before we enter?” As several people turned to glare at her she grinned unrepentant. “Only joking, mostly.”

Rolling his eyes, Harry bypassed the fountain, then headed inside quickly. Inside the temple was, as well it was a vision to be sure, much like the temple in the Friendly Arm Inn dedicated to Garl Glittergold, the gnome god of jewels... or something, Harry wasn’t certain he remembered right. Lathander was the god of birth, spring, renewal, and vitality, and looking around the temple, Harry was both reminded of that fact, and of how he had discovered that through the book he had been given by Gellana Mirrorshade.

In the center of the large room that dominated the temple was a statue of the god in question. A young, broad shouldered, smiling man with perfect hair and face, the statue held forth a globe made to look like a star, and indeed glowing like a sun filling the room with its radiance. Around the room on the walls were murals, showing various contests of physicality, images of farming, women holding babies in one hand, and their husbands on their other arms. All of the people featured in them were young, almost gleaming with health, a sign of Lathander’s worship, and perhaps thin gold paint being worked into the murals. On the floor around the statue were nine red glowing discs, representing something Harry was certain, but he didn’t know what. And around them were four blue discs set in a square.

On each of these discs was a dark green-skinned woman. Two of them were humming some kind of hymn, their arms outstretched as they raised their voices in prayer to Lathander. The other two were dancing in place, their legs flashing coming up even to their heads as they twirled. It was like no dance Harriet ever seen before, and as Harry looked at them, it was all he could do to not stare.

You have resisted Charm from the Selines Nifiri and Raahnsuk.

Although they do tend to flaunt their sensuality, much like their cousins the dryads, the Sirines attempt to Charm you is in no way an attack on you. It is simply a natural reaction to their beauty. These beings, worshipers of Lathander, are here to sing their praises to him, and to be a visible show of the vitality and self-perfection of the body that any true follower of Lathander strives for.

They may also be here because of the birth and conception aspects of Lathander's worship. But no one in polite society would bring that up.

After this came another notification about a new Bestiary page.

Name: Sirine.

A cousin of the dryads, the Sirines inhabit the coasts of the world, particularly the Sword Coast, because they can swim almost as well as the mermaids of myth. They prefer shallow water, but can swim deeper at need. And like dryads there are no male Sirines. Many of them are intelligent enough to mingle with polite society, and since they don't need to stay near their trees, many do. Others... not so much. Sirines have no natural armor, but they are just as adept with spells as dryads are and are excellent shots with their bows.

Strengths: They are completely immune to any mental domination spells. Water allows them to Hide In Shadows for a limited duration.

Weaknesses: Sirines are weak to Cold and Lightning based spells. If caught without a nearby body of water, fire spells work just as well on them as on others.

Attitude towards Adventurers: Varies wildly. You can be either a deadly opponent they want to charm and then kill, or you can be a male and they want to have babies with you. There is literally that wide a range. In the wild though, Sirines often combine those extremes. Like Praying Mantises and the most violent of dryads, once a wild sirine has your seed, they have no use for the rest of you.

Next to him, Imoen whistled, her eyes locked on the four sirines. Harry didn't receive any notification that she was charmed, but she grinned widely as she moved forward, actually stepping in front of one of the two dancers.

For her part, Imoen was not the kind of person who liked being sad overmuch. And she had spent several minutes trying to cajole Harry out of his gloom and anger. Now, seeing these four, any thoughts of the fact she in turn should be angry or sad at Branwen's passing faded. She strode forward with a smile on her face. "Damn, if we had more time, I think I'd want to stay here in the temple with you and learned some of your moves, babe!"

Although a little confused by the term of endearment the other woman had used, the Sirine, the one labeled Nifiri in Harry's eyes, laughed, holding out her arms to Imoen. "Seeking

self perfection in all things is part of worshiping our Lord, and if you wish to take a step down that road yourself, I am more than happy to help. Come, move with me, show your appreciation of the great Lathander.”

Imoen nodded, and a moment later, the two of them were dancing around one another in the blue circle that the Sirine had originally inhabited on her own. Needless to say they were almost constantly bumping into one another, nearly grinding their hips together occasionally, which Harry’s male mind certainly did not object to. The other Sirines, even the two at the back who were singing hymns to their God, also began to smile, watching Imoen closely.

As Harry wondered if perhaps Imoen would be drawn to Lathander or if this was simply her flirtatious nature bringing out the sirine’s own, a chuckle caused him to look to the side, where he saw a lightly armed and armored man standing, waving away another worshiper for the moment. “Normally, it is the male portion of any pair who reacts to my Lord’s Sirines, but this isn’t the first time a young woman has been so taken with their moves. Greetings traveler, my name is Kelddath, I am the head priest here. You and your companion both look as if you have had a rough time of it recently. Are you here for healing? What to say that even though I might wish otherwise, you will have to pay for any healing spells myself or my followers use upon you.”

Name: Kelddath Ormylr.

Race: human

Gender: male.

Class: priest of Lathander, level 27 (22)

An extremely well-placed, extremely experienced priest, Kelddath has somewhat let himself go since taking over the temple of morning here in Beregost. While that is a tremendously important role, it being the only temple to rival the temple in Athkatla for several countries worth of land, it does not call upon his adventuring skills all that well. But those muscles are more for show now than for actual use. Still, he is an excellent leader for the people of his temple, and has even been making noises lately of getting back into proper shape to help the town through this time of trouble.

Attitude towards you: concern, interest, amusement.

“I’m sorry to say that while my friend and I would no doubt benefit from healing, we are actually here to get you to come with us. There’s been a major battle in town, and my party has several dead that need to be revived. Too many for me to move, and as you can see from my friend’s **tiny body**,” Harry raised his voice on the last few words, causing Imoen to squawk in outrage from where she was dancing, “she couldn’t help me much.”

Harry could have gotten Minsc to help him, and perhaps between the three of them they could have indeed brought all three of the dead to hear, but Harry felt that would’ve been

extremely dangerous given Viconia's drow nature even with the color change charm that Imoen had use on her. Who knew what kind of anti-illusion spells or what have you a temple might have on it just as a matter of course?

And if the priest decided to become violent once he realized Viconia's race, they had a better chance of overwhelming him if they could get Kelddath away from his temple.

Seeing the priest's face slowly close down a little, Harry hastily went on. "I'm afraid that the city watch also has some dead that need reviving. Whereas my party took the fight into the mansion of the individual we were trying to arrest, they were faced with two clay golems. Officer Vai said they had seven dead, with four possibly able to be revived."

At that, Kelddath's face cleared a bit, before becoming a bit more guileful. "While I would still prefer to do the reviving here in my temple, it isn't as if the temple will miss me for an hour or so. And if the city watch were both part of this battle and in need of my services, I will come and see to them as a matter of civic duty. But I have to once more warn you that you and your party will need to pay for your own reviving spells. And if I am to come to you for this... I don't suppose you're going to be staying in the area?"

Harry nodded, thinking quickly how to put his agreement with Vai into words without actually giving away any information about it in general. "Officer Vai was part of this battle, and she and I made an agreement that my party would stay in the area to help out with the city watch. Considering that it was our investigation which led to this battle in the first place, that seemed somewhat fair to me."

"Indeed? In that case, perhaps you can take on a quest for myself and the temple. To the north of here, just outside the city borders there apparently is a wyvern. Recently it slaughtered two pilgrims coming to worship at the temple here. Unfortunately, there are no rangers among my flock and we lack the ability to track the beast down. But such an effrontery cannot go unpunished."

Seeing this as the mild demand for extra payment it was, Harry frowned a bit, although not because he saw any problem with the quest. "Are you sure it's a wyvern? I only ask because we've been dealing with bandits and groups like them for so long that I would think it far more likely that any pilgrim would be waylaid by them rather than a simple beast," he asked, even as a minor quest notification popped up into his line of vision.

You have been asked to take on the minor side quest, **Hunting the Wyvern**. Kelddath, priest of Lathander has asked you to avenge some pilgrims slain by a rogue wyvern in the area. Bring back his head for a thousand gold and a small bump in your reputation with the locals.

This ties into your Side Quest (medium) **An Oath Fulfilled**.

"Actually, they would not bother pilgrims overmuch. For one thing, most of the time pilgrims move in large groups. These two had been left behind by their party. Most of their

fellows had thought they had simply turned back, until the third member of their small band, a trio of brother, showed up with the tale of a wyvern attack. And if it was simple bandits, I'm certain that combined myself and my ladies could deal with it. But while Sirines may be cousin to the nymphs, away from the ocean and the shore, their woodcraft fails."

Harry nodded at that, understanding what Kelddath was saying there thanks to the bestiary page he had received on the Sirines. "My party has both a Ranger and a Druid amongst us. We can hunt the monster down for certain."

"In that case, I believe that any hesitation I have of coming with you is now gone," Kelddath announced cheerfully. "Ladies, if you could please release this young man's companion, the two of them and myself need to be on our way."

As he had been speaking to the priest, the other Sirine who had been dancing had moved over to join Imoen and the first Sirine. And looking at them now, Harry was quite positive that the dance they were doing was not one that should be done in public, despite the grin on Kelddath's face and the smiles on the other people in the temple. *Conception, vitality and birth... could not be more in your face tha... lets stop that thought*, Harry shook his head, trying hard not to look at the trio of ladies, flushing slightly.

Despite his experience with flirting back and candle came and the night he'd spent with the elder dryad, he still wasn't all that used to sexily clad young women. Especially not sexily clad young women who were currently gyrating like that against one another.

Imoen reluctantly left her new friends, moving towards Harry and smiling slightly to herself. *Well, that sure as hell picked my spirits right up. And it seems to have banished Harry's funk, for now. I'll take that as a win on many levels.*

The two of them turned, heading out of the temple with Kelddath behind them. Kelddath stopped occasionally to speak to some of the other people in the temple grounds, but soon they were on the road heading deeper into Beregost. The priest made small talk as they went, and Harry felt he was an affable, intelligent fellow, brimming with enthusiasm for Beregost as a whole, and the priesthood of Lathander. He didn't seem as hidebound as the priest of Helm they had met in Nashkel, but that should have been assumed. And Harry noticed he didn't try to recruit Harry as the priest in Nashkel had, something Harry was thankful for.

Worried about what might happen if priests of Lathander had some skill to see through illusions or something similar, Harry tried to think up a way to bring up the drow and see Kelddath's opinion on the drow as they walked. And one came to him easily. "By the way, you mentioned the wyvern issue. Are there any other quests you know of, or rumors that might lead to other ways to help the town. We've noticed that Beregost seems to be falling on hard times thanks to the Iron Intake Issue."

"HAH alliteration!" Kelddath guffawed, somewhat ruining Imoen's opinion of the man given his seeming enjoyment of that low form of humor. "But I do know of a few. There is a

rumor of a band of hobgoblins on the northeast demanding payment for passage from anyone they come upon. Several bears and other beasts have also been seen nearby, and I know that Bram, one of my young priests, reported a animal attack at one of the outer farmsteads.”

Kelddath paused for a moment, then shrugged. “There is also a rumor of a drow going around, but I take that with a grain of salt. After all, no drow would be so suicidal as to come near my temple! The light of Lathander would never allow such things. Evil creatures like that know well to stay away from such places. And besides, any lone drow would be even more foolish and stupid to come into a town of good folk like Beregost.”

Well, that’s about as specific as I think I can get away with right now. Damn it. I guess we can only hope that the color change charm will work now, and have Kelddath revive Viconia last, that we’ll have two extra fighters if nothing else. Although... FUCK. Why is it that I am thinking of the whole Mystra/Shar rivalry thing? Ugh... is, is there something between Lathander and Shar too, beyond the whole evil deity versus good deity thing?

Shar was a neutral evil deity, Harry knew. From the description of that label he’d read back in Candlekeep and Viconia’s description of her, Harry would honestly term her amoral and self-serving rather than truly evil, but he wondered if that was because of Viconia’s bias and just a lack of knowledge even in Candlekeep of the goddess herself. *I will have to keep an open mind on Shar in general. We’ve been lucky so far that we haven’t done nearly as much fighting at night, let alone our magic usage, as during the day, and no Oaths at night. But when that happens... ugh, we might find ourselves in the middle of a godly level cat fight.*

Although his mental tone at that point was light and almost joking, Harry knew that would be a very bad place to be. *Still, we can maybe do something about that going forward. Cut down on our Blood Magic usage, entirely, maybe? If we can. And try to maybe, maybe turn Viconia away from Shar? But for the moment, we need to concentrate on the here and now.*

The moment they entered the mansion’s foyer, Harry gestured to where Minsc was still hovering over the body of Dynaheir. “If you could start with Dynaheir please, my friend Minsc would undoubtedly prefer that.”

“Minsc indeed would! Priestly man, give the breath of life back to my witch so that soon we can go about our ways of buttkicking for goodness!” Minsc bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Kelddath winced a little at the noise, but still smiled cheerily at the large Ranger. “Well, far be it from any priest of a god of light to gainsay that kind of ambition.”

He moved over to Dynaheir, and cast Raise Dead on her with a wave of his hands and a few murmured words.

The Rasheman witch came alive with a cry of pain, and Minsc was instantly kneeling by her side and lifting her, almost cradling her like a child as he apologized several times in rapid succession for not stopping the blow that had taken her life.

Quickly Jaheira moved over and between her and the priest, they soon had Dynaheir back into the yellow on her life bar. And as they did, Dynaheir remonstrated gently with her protector. "Do not flagellate herself on this point my large friend. Death comes for us all, and this was but a battlefield. Nor was it any one blow that did me in, but numerous small cuts over time. I remember that at the very least, my death was in no way your fault. I am merely grateful it was not permanent."

She smiled over at Harry and the others, and Harry watched as a notification popped up in front of his eyes.

Due to aiding in reviving Dynaheir, you have won +700 Trust and +500 Respect with Dynaheir.

Although looking strangely vindicated about the ordeal, Dynaheir is very pleased to be alive once more.

"Yet even so, as your bodyguard I should have..."

"Enough!" Dynaheir pushed out of Minsc's arms with some difficulty, to stand on her own. Once she was certain she was in no danger of falling flat on her face, Dynaheir smacked Minsc very lightly on the forehead. "Simply be grateful that my death was not the eternal one." She looked around, noticing Branwen was not among them and then up at the second floor where she saw Branwen's body. "Not all of us were so lucky."

The priest left the two of them, moving over to where Jaheira sat beside Khalid on the floor. "And now we have the other half of the one married pair among us," Harry intoned, his own eyes tracking up to where Branwen's body lay before turning back resolutely to Kelddath. He had to concentrate on those who could be saved right now.

Nodding, the priest knelt and once more cast the Raise Dead spell on Khalid. A moment later, Jaheira and Harry helped the half elf to his feet. "How are you feeling Khalid?"

"S, somewhat out of it, but it is n, n, not the first time I have been r, r, revived Harry," Khalid said, smiling at his young friend and his wife. "It is n, n, not a feeling that one s, s, should ever get used to, but is no m, m, more than I would f, f, feel after a massive b, b, binge."

"And doesn't that say something right there?" Jaheira drawled.

Khalid tried to look mildly affronted. "I feel a, a, as if I am under a, a, attack for some reason."

Snorting, Harry waved away the notification he had just won 2000 friendship points with Khalid and left the married pair to bicker, girding his loins mentally for what was about to come. Luckily, Edwin and Imoen both were also watching the priest as he and Harry made their way over to Viconia. Even Minsc got into the act, moving up behind the priest, his face grim, but his hands on the hilt of his Claymore.

Minsc wouldn't like it, but if they had to threaten this priest in some fashion, he would go along with it for the sake of the party and Viconia. He wasn't close to her as he had been to Brandy, but he knew that without Viconia, Harry and Jaheira would both be dead, and without both of them, the party would have died as well. So in a way, Minsc owed Viconia both his own life and that of his Witch. That was major consideration in the large Ranger's mind.

And it was at this point that things began to go wrong.

Kelddath pushed back the dead woman's hood to lay one hands on her forehead, the other on her chest, frowning slightly at her features. Greater Observation instantly told Harry the man was suddenly suspicious and wary.

As he began to call upon Lathander for the Raise Dead spell, Imoen and Harry both gasped as the skin of Viconia's forehead under his touch began to shift and darken, the color change charm disappearing. At the same time, a message appeared in the party's field of vision, all of them this time instead of just Harry or Imoen, the same throbbing almost angry gold color.

The Priest of Lathander, Kelddath, has attempted to use the Raise Dead spell on a follower of an opposing god! Lathander has responded negatively to this attempt, and it has resulted in a backlash. All illusionary or deceptive spells interfering with Kelddath's ability to see the truth have faded.

In this case, it appears as if at least two gods are pissed at your efforts to help a worshipper of Shar. Don't try to perform a hat trick.

Seeing Viconia's blue skin Kelddath instantly stiffened, then whirled on Harry, his previously affable expression gone, replaced by one of wrath and confusion. "You! You said this was a party member!? You party with a, a **drow**!? And moreover you ask me to bring her back?! Do you have any idea of the **effrontery** of that!"

"I didn't, and I am sorry for misleading you. But I am not going to apologize for asking you to revive my companion," Harry said calmly, having had time to ready his defense of this act. She is not just a drow, she is Viconia. She is on the run from her own people, having refused to kill an innocent child in one of the mysteries. Surely..."

"So you say!" Kelddath interrupted him, practically growling now as he glared at Harry and then around his party. Being an experienced Adventurer he instantly noticed the position he was now in. But he did not back down. "So you say, but you could well be under some kind of compulsion spell, or simply thinking with your nether regions. While Lathander smiles on that to a certain degree, you cannot let your passions for the female form override the knowledge that this is a **drow**! She is an enemy to all that is good!"

"Viconia is not! I do not deny that her people, the society that birthed her, is a violent the extreme. But she has rejected that society, she has rejected her heritage among them. She no longer worships the spider queen and...!"

“And then who does she now worship!?” Kelddath interrupted, gesturing down to the still-dead drow woman. “For my god to reject my prayer and then forcibly open my eyes like this, it cannot be a god of good, or even one of the better neutral gods.”

Harry didn’t answer, and Kelddath glared at him, until Edwin interrupted the confrontation. “Oh get it over with you useless simians! She worships Shar, the dark lady of magic. It is a choice to be sure, but while Shar is an evil goddess, she is not nearly as vile a creature as Lolth.”

“SHAR?!” Lathander looked sick as the word passed his lips, and he slowly backed away from Harry, staring at him and then around at the others, concentrating on the two magic users. “Your drow worships the Lady of Night!? She is an outright enemy of the Morning Lord, her domain being diametrically opposed to his. No wonder my invocation failed!”

Ah, so that’s why I thought there might be something wrong before. Damn it, I should have spent more time reading about the gods and their various issues back in Candlekeep. I didn’t really well... believe in them I guess at the time. But they are for bloody certain real, aren’t they?”

Aloud, he said, “I will admit I still have a problem with the goddess she does worship, but Viconia needed the help to escape the under dark, and I cannot gainsay that choice. Denying her the chance to live once more, to continue to build her life appear on the surface, to continue to try and build a reputation not touched by her race is the worst kind of prejudice and bigotry!”

Kelddath gritted his teeth, glaring up at Harry and then around at the others. “It is my purview to say who I do and do not revive from the dead. I would not revive a murderer or murderous, or a child abuser. And similarly I will not revive a drow!”

“Would you withhold those that service from someone who was simply suspected? With no real proof? Have you even actually faced any drow in battle, seen of their atrocities for yourself? There is a difference between passing judgment on someone when you are certain of their guilt, and simply guilt by association! No, this isn’t even that, it is guilt by race! How dare you stand there and say you serve a God of light when you are so determined to pass judgment on one who has not earned it,” Harry nearly shouted back.

Persuasion check passed.

You have convinced Kelddath to revive Viconia. He is still not very happy about it, but your words have actually had an impact rather than the threat of violence this time.

Given the priest’s high level and how battered the party was that made sense to Harry, so he was very grateful that his words had gotten through to the older man. As he stared at the priest, Kelddath finally nodded. “I will revive her, but then I will want you and the rest of your party out of Beregost! I will not have a drow or a drow lover living within the town I call home!”

Now it was Harry's turn to shake his head. "Believe me, if we could move on, we would. Heck, if we could just live out in the woods and come back in to take quests, we would. But Officer Vai and I made an oath-bound agreement that we would remain in Beregost for three months. We literally can't leave without breaking that agreement."

Kelddath snorted. "And that is my problem why? You shouldn't be traveling with a drow in the first place. If you are forced to face some hardship, that is merely the gods' way of telling you you're thinking with your lower parts rather than anything else. I want that fowl bitch out of Beregost. That is my agreement."

"Again, you are simply judging Viconia by her race. Can you not see how stupid that is? How unjust it is?"

"My God is not a God of Justice. He is a God of birth renewal, the dawn, light and spring. All things that the drow and in particular Shar is opposed to. My fellow believers have had numerous encounters with those who worship Shar, she of darkness, emptiness, and clinging on to memories of past wrongs and pains. This drow's worship of her might seem better to most than if she worshipped Lolth, but not to me or those who follow the Morning Lord. No, I will revive her for you are doing because you think you are in the right. But after that I will give you two hours to get out of town before I tell the mayor and every other official of Beregost that you were traveling with a drow. That is my duty," Kelddath said grimly.

"So you would set the mob on us instead. Rather sanctimonious of you," Harry ground out through a clenched jaw. "Especially since you know we are Adventurers and would defend ourselves. And you call yourself a priest of a God of light?"

"You seem to be questioning that quite a lot young man. I assure you; I have been serving Lathander for longer than you have been alive! I believe I know what he would prefer me to do."

"In that case, you leave me no choice. You will revive my friend, and you will take an oath," Harry said grimly. *Bloody hell! This is not going to go well! This... it's like I am directly challenging the gods. But their reactions today have forced me into this! There's no other priest in range and I can't let Viconia die, she's my friend damn it! I know this may be seen as a direct challenge, but I have to do it!*

Grimacing slightly, he gestured, and a stupefy spell washed over the priest, holding him in place causing him to squawk in shock. Thanks to the healing spells Jaheira had used on him earlier he was able to take the hit to his health. "You will give your word to keep our secrets. I already gave my Oath to Vai, and you are attempting to force me to renege on that Oath. I can't do that, and I can't not help my comrade, leaving her to die permanently."

Harry then let a small smile appear on his face for a second. "And don't worry. To make it binding, I will be giving my Oath to you as well. At least that way, whatever happens, no one can accuse me of taking advantage of you."

Kelddath's eyes narrowed, and even as Harry stood forward, grasping his frozen arm. Jaheira quickly moved to his side, grabbing at his arm while her husband looked on in confusion, wondering why Edwin looked ready to bolt out the door and Minsc and Imoen both looked deeply concerned. "Are you sure about this, Harry? Given what we have learned..."

"Can you figure out another solution? Some other priest within range? If you can, we'll leave Imoen and the rest and you, me and Khalid can rush out to him or her. But..."

Jaheira bit her lip, once more lamenting the Curse of the Dread One. If she had even half her nominal levels, she could easily have revived Viconia herself... and it was very unlikely that any of them would have died in the preceding battle. "I do not. But this will have consequences... or an immediate negative effect."

"I know. But she is a friend and a party member. I would do this for any of you, and just because Viconia is a drow and worships Shar is not enough for me to turn my back on that. What kind of leader would I be if I wasn't willing to try and save someone when I could?"

Kelddath's eyes narrowed, wondering what was going on, although Harry's words did soften his stance somewhat. Harry's Greater Observation told him:

While Kelddath personally approves of your loyalty to your party members, he believes your continued willingness to attempt to help a worshipper of Shar is a sign of ignorance and youth. On the bright side, he at least no longer thinks you are thinking entirely with your nether regions. It is now very much an issue of two faiths entirely opposed to one another. And the fact you are a paladin, a Adventurer who should be utterly opposed to a worshipper of a dark goddess.

While Kelddath's reaction was very mixed, Jaheira's was not, and both she, her husband and indeed everyone else, even Edwin, reacted positively to Harry's statement. Indeed, the Red Wizard had even paused in leaving the mansion, instead crouching beside the entrance, ready to bolt. "It says much about you that you are willing to go so far for your allies. I will not try to stop you further Harry. But if this fails..."

Harry winced. "Then the gods are not as just as they make themselves out to be. But at least I can hope that I'll be the one paying the price."

Shaking her head, Jaheira stood back, moving back to her husband, signaling with a gesture she would explain what was going on in a moment, not taking her eyes off Harry. Imoen too was watching him worriedly, biting her lip, while Minsc was trying, in true Minsc fashion to explain how the gods were watching Harry far more than was normal at the moment.

But Harry ignored them, turning his attention back to the priest. *Best to get this over with, whatever is going to happen...*

"Ergo Fides," Harry murmured, following the same kind of mental process he had earlier, the same he had used in the mines of Nashkel to bind Edwin. Kelddath watched in shock as

tendrils of magic, swirls of white light, appeared around Harry's hand, reaching out to his own arm, hovering there like tendrils, waiting to latch on but not yet doing so.

At the same time, Harry could feel a pressure building around him, weighing him down. Something was here, something was watching, and it was not happy. Yet still, Harry persevered. Continuing to stare into the older man's eyes, Harry pronounced his Oath. "I, Harry of Candlekeep, do swear that Viconia Devir is no threat to Beregost, and that my party and I will do nothing to endanger the town further than it already is through the machinations of others. I further swear that the moment my oath to Officer Vai of the City Watch is fulfilled, we will leave, never to return. In return for this Oath, I ask that Kelddath of the Song of the Morning Temple keep Viconia's heritage a secret as well as my special abilities. I will ask for nothing more. So do I swear."

You have offered a magically binding Oath to Kelddath of Beregost and the Song of the Morning Temple.

In this world, giving your word and swearing oaths of this nature are important! Oaths are rarely given, and the Gods of Light take them very seriously. Since you are offering this Oath to a follower of one of those gods, this is doubled!

Kelddath's eyes were wide, and he stared at the magic around Harry's hand then to his face and back again, licking his lips in what was obviously some kind of expression of shock. Then his eyes widened, and his hair seemed to move in an unseen wind.

Before Harry could even wonder what was causing that, Harry suddenly felt a **shift**, a sensation hard to describe. As if there was a sudden discordant note in the world around him? That was mixing metaphors horribly, but it was the closest he could get. A **distortion** occurred, and suddenly, his mind and consciousness was separated from his body, out of phase with the rest of reality around him. Everything physical froze, and suddenly, Harry's presence was now standing next to his physical body, translucent almost as he looked down at himself. And around him, filling the space yet somehow not crowding the entryway, were four gods.

One of whom instantly grabbed his mental projection (or whatever it was, Harry very dearly hoped it wasn't his soul) and lifted Harry up into the air by his throat. *"You utter ass! Do you think I allowed the Experiment that is your life to go forward after you Cheated Like a Bitch to gain magic only to watch you turn around and help a fellower of Shar!?! Of all people!?"*

The voice was musical, feminine, and with a strange reverb effect of another feminine voice underneath it. Yet it was also very angry, and very powerful.

The woman effortlessly holding Harry's projection in the air was also very obviously not human. For one, she was as tall as an ogre, making Harry feel small, **his legs flailing ineffectually at equal height with the woman's leather armored bodice. For another, at the waist the woman's body shifted into that of a snake,** and she had four arms instead of two **jutting out**

from her shoulders. Her face was somewhat normal though, if by normal you meant gorgeous, reminding Harry of a pinup he'd seen back in his old life named Sultry Cindy or something, with eyes that looked like tiny spiraling galaxies, hair so black it looked almost like liquid charcoal and skin of alabaster with small, currently twisted into a scowl, lips painted purple.

Two arms belonging to one of the other giant beings surrounding Harry reached out and grabbed Mystra pulling her back, slowly overpowering the woman despite her own four arms. The other god was in full plate armor, and was a large, powerfully built man, with a simple sword strapped to his back. His armor was of equally simple, utilitarian make, and there were numerous dents scattered throughout his armor. His face, framed by dark brown hair, matching beard and deep set eyes, seemed somewhat grim, but not without humor, lines around his mouth showing he smiled and frowned with equal measure. The only exception was his right hand gauntlet, which was enameled white, so bright it nearly shown in the frozen light of this elongated moment as it gripped Mystra's shoulder.

This man was a soldier first and foremost, it was clear, and though he said nothing, Harry knew he could only be one god: Torm, the Loyal Fury, a former mortal who rose to godhood through his sacrifice in the recent Time of Troubles.

Another voice interjected now, drawing Harry's eyes to the speaker even as Mystra's grip slowly weakened on his neck. "ENOUGH MYSTRA, YOU ARE LETTING YOUR HUMAN EMOTIONS SHOW AGAIN. HE NEEDS TO BE ABLE TO BREATHE IN ORDER TO ANSWER FOR HIS MANIPULATION OF OATHS, AND, YES, EXPLAIN TO US WHY WE SHOULD ALLOW HIM TO CONTINUE TO USE HIS SO-CALLED BLOOD MAGIC GOING FORWARD."

The speaker was easily the oldest looking of the given his long white hair and beard which merged into one entity almost around his shoulders. He was bare chested, with only a baldric across his chest. In one hand he held a sword, bared and ready for battle. That was his only hand, the other arm ending in a stump just behind his hand. His eyes too were gone, leaving sockets behind. Both were old wounds, long healed, but still ugly. Those wounds could only mean this was Tyr, the god of Justice.

"For a paladin who has yet to swear his allegiance to one of us, you are awfully quick to throw around oaths aren't you?" Another one of the majestic beings around him stated, almost sounding wryly amused yet with a core of anger. "Such things are not supposed to be used thusly even if you are using your own power to bind yourself rather than ours. Whatever the outcome of this tribunal, I feel that you should no longer be allowed to do so."

This god stood closest to the now entirely frozen Kelddath, to one side of the still struggling Mystra and Torm (and the still dangling Harry). This god was a giant of a man, towering a full head over the others who were all tall beings themselves. He seemed younger than Torm or Tyr, although Harry knew that was merely how Lathander appeared regardless given his area of influence. Similarly, that was why he was well-muscled, and why he had a visible aura of light the color of a sunrise around him. And unlike the statue in the temple, the real thing's hair was made of pure fire.

As Harry took in the forms of the gods in front of him, Tyr spoke. "WHILE HE HAS YET TO USE HIS ABILITY TO ENFORCE OATHS IN ANY EVIL MANNER, THE POTENTIAL IS THERE. NOT JUST FOR VAINGLORIOUS OR VILE USAGE, BUT SIMPLE MISUSE. WHILE THE SUFFERING HE GOES THROUGH GIVING SUCH AN OATH IS A GOOD DEFENSE AGAINST MISUSE, IT IS OBVIOUSLY NOT ENOUGH. BUT EVEN IF WE WERE TO REMOVE THE ABILITY FROM HARRY, HIS COMPANION, THE SECOND ELEMENT, WOULD STILL HAVE ACCESS TO IT. NOR DO I FEEL THAT WE HAVE CAUSE TO REMOVE IT FROM IMOEN IN TURN. SHE HAS ONLY USED IT IN CONJUNCTION WITH HARRY'S PLANS, AFTER ALL."

That seemed to get Mystra to think, and she stopped struggling against Torm, letting Harry fall to his feet, where he stumbled, dropping to his knees. *"That's true. Imoen has such potential too, I don't want to interfere with that, or with the spread of new magics. But he used the Ergo Fides spell, and even made an equivalent binding agreement with a Fellower of Shar."*

Mystra looked over at the other gods thoughtfully. In actuality, although Harry was not aware of it, she and the other gods here were... not really supposed to be appearing like this. Yes, one or two of the Triad who oversaw most paladins could have, given the way Harry was using the Ergo Fides spell, the same with Mystra himself. But at the moment, there really was no reason for them to appear like this, if you were looking at Harry's actions alone.

Well, aside from pique in Mystra's case. The current Mystra had, until the Time of Troubles, been the mortal woman Midnight, and as such, the new Mystra was both more whimsical and far more emotional than her 'predecessor', if such a word was at all accurate. And Midnight/Mystra **hated** Shar with the passion of a thousand burning suns for her disgusting Shadowweave and the hatred Shar felt toward her in turn.

The presence of all four of the other godly sendings was thus extremely unusual and could not be easily explained, other than perhaps the fact that many gods had gotten the taste for interacting with the mortal plain. But Potter, as Mystra well knew, was different. First, he was a paladin, the only Bhaalspawn to choose to follow the gods of light. Most others were neutral at best. That was perhaps enough to explain why Tyr or Torm would appear at this moment: a need to make certain a young paladin realized that he was not the sole arbiter or what was right and just, and to enforce upon such a one that he needed to be wary of hubris and, in Mystra's opinion, not make decisions with his lower head.

But Harry was also special both in his extra-planar origins, and the fact he was a Fates Fulcrum, a mortal chosen by the Fates of his home dimension to be a fulcrum, a being whose actions could shift the future in a myriad of important ways. The Fates themselves, fortune, chance, and so forth, distorted around Fulcrums in very strange ways. None of the gods, not even Mystra, were the reason behind Harry being able to survive his magical mishap, only in his safe arrival. The Advanced Adventuring System? It's entire creation was utterly random, even if Mystra had been able to influence some of how it interacted with the world, and, Mystra was certain, the shard of Bhaal within the vessel Potter had come to inhabit had also had an impact.

Fates Fulcrums could also create ripples that would survive long after any work of hand or mind of most others. This was already starting in Harry's case, in the experiments Edwin (and unknown to the Red Wizard, Dynaheir) had begun on recreating the spells from Harry's original home. And since this was part of why Lord Ao had allowed Tyr and Mystra to allow the Experiment to succeed, that was all to the good in Mystra's mind. *If only he wasn't using Oaths and so much of his magic to help a fellower of Shar!*

Midnight/Mystra knew that was petty of her, but she couldn't help it. Her still human side's hatred for Shar was just too strong. *And he is being way too free with that particular skill. Perhaps we can take a page from Ilmater's book.* With that in mind, she spoke up once more. "While we cannot prevent Imoen from using this spell, I feel the penalty needs to be even harsher than it already is for both her and Harry both. I vote that we make the cost of using Ergo Fides commensurately harsher, and the penalties for breaking an oath even worse than they would be otherwise."

The other gods all looked at one another for a few silent moments, communicating silently. Then Mystra, Torm and the two other gods all stated, **"AGREED,"** as one.

As the word echoed around him, Harry felt a further shift within himself. As if something had shifted, a new limitation on his magic. Feeling that, Harry understood instinctually that the Gods had just made it so that the Ergo Fides spell would take as much of his health as much as it was possible to take without killing him or putting him in a place where he could be killed easily. He would have to call on the gods to make any further agreements, or suffer immensely.

Bugger me with a rusty nail, I was worried about one divine intervention, not five of them! Why!? Harry thought, as his body began to recover from the odd feeling.

As he thought that, Harry was able to take in the last, currently silent god standing around him. Furthest away from both Harry and Kelddath this worthy looked almost like a leper on a bad day. Although well muscled he was so thin as to be emaciated, stooped, and heavily wounded, his whole body covered in an eternal litany of pain, his arms and legs encased in chains, leading nowhere. This was Ilmater, the god of perseverance. He was also very obviously busy with his own matters, staring at nothing as more wounds appeared and disappeared constantly across Ilmater's body, not looking at any of the other gods around him.

The presence of any one of these gods would have been enough to drop Harry to his knees if he wasn't already on them. All five was enough to send his mind reeling, gibbering, **barely able to form coherent thought.** And he somehow understood these semblances were but shards, tiny bits of attention split off from greater wholes to take part in this whatever it was. But Harry refused to be cowed. Grimacing, he began to slowly push to his feet, setting his will against the haze of the various deific auras around him without even realizing he was doing it, a

haze of reddish energy surrounding him, silencing the argument around him as every god there, even Ilmater watched in interest.

It took some effort, but eventually, after a set of time that with a wrench that was possibly as painful as his changing body had been back during the customization process, Harry was on his feet once more, meeting the gazes of the deific sendings around him warily.

"Hm... well, at least his willpower seems to be what I would expect from a Fate Marked," Mystra grunted, moving back away from Harry. As she did, Harry noticed that Mystra's body had changed, and was now seemingly that of a normal woman, except for the eyes, which had not changed. "Still, we need to talk about the main issue here. This little bastard has taken my gift, and has manipulated the very nature of Oaths, a power given to us gods by The All Father. And he has done so to aid a follower of Shar!"

WHILE SHE SPEAKS FROM A PLACE OF ANGER AND HATRED RAHTER THAN CALM DELIBERATION, I HAVE TO AGREE WITH MYSTRA. WHO HAS GIVEN YOU THE POWER TO SAY WHAT IS GOOD AND JUST, SO MUCH SO YOU THINK YOU CAN FORCE THAT BELIEF ON OTHERS? WE ARE THE JUDGE OF SOULS, THE JUDGES OF THE WORLD, THAT IS OUR PLACE IN THE OVERALL TAPESTRY OF THE UNIVERSE. AND YET YOU, WHO TRAVEL WITH TWO INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE UNDOUBTEDLY EVIL, BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN DICTATE TERMS TO OUR PRIESTHOOD? AFTER ALREADY MANIPULATING YOUR ABILITY TO MAKE MAGICALLY BINDING OATHS ALREADY? DID YOU NOT THINK WE, THE JUDGES OF JUSTICE AND LAW AND THE LADY OF MAGIC, WOULD BE AWARE OF WHAT WAS GOING ON?" Tyr demanded.

Yet while Tyr's words were angry, they were also a demand that Harry defend himself. Tyr did not seem to be passing unilateral judgement despite how angry Mystra appeared. And Tyr's words also seemed to have further calmed Mystra down. Indeed, as Harry realized that Tyr giving Harry a chance to explain his actions, he also saw that Mystra, who had once more shifted forms, looked almost apologetic.

Harry made to speak, somewhat surprised that he was able to do so with the weight of the gods still upon him. Once more, Harry realized the gods were willing to hear about his motivations, but he also got the impression that any attempt at prevarication or misdirection would doom him.

Forcing the words out was still horribly difficult, but he did it, stating, "I dislike broad labels, in fact, I hate them! No matter that such broad labels might be accurate for the most part, such as with the red wizards or the Drow, they should not be taken at face value. How could that be justice? Justice needs to take each individual and judge them on their own merits, not the merits of others. It is as if you decided to slay all street urchins in the world because many of them have taken to thievery and murder."

"NOW WHO IS IT WHO IS USING BROAD LABELS? THAT METAPHOR WAS SO CONVOLUTED, IT WAS PRACTICALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO FOLLOW," Tyr snorted. But Harry could see he and Torm were nodding, and Ilmater was at least not protesting, despite the fact he was now

concentrating on Harry to an almost alarming degree. As they did, a large portion of the pressure Harry was feeling from their presence seemed to fade away.

"I'll agree with that, but the point is, I do not agree that Viconia and Edwin are evil. I would argue that Edwin's actions are based on self interest and the society he was born into. Self-interest alone is not evil! It can only be labeled evil when in conjunction with evil acts. And while Edwin has talked a good talk occasionally, I have not seen him do any particularly evil thing."

"AND IF YOU DID, WHAT WOULD YOU DO?" Ilmater demanded, his voice pain filled and broken, yet powerful, almost as strong as Tyr's. **"WOULD YOU LEAVE HIS VICTIMS TO SUFFER?"**

"No. Depending on the circumstances, I would either stop him, cut ties with him, or... or even kill him if I had to," Harry admitted. "If Edwin had gone back on our deal and then tried to somehow abscond with Dynaheir or experiment on her, than I would have done so. He hasn't. Again, I feel that his actions are simply self-serving. He might be willing to go to lengths that a person shouldn't, but I have yet to see him do so, and I will not pass judgement on him for something he could do. That would be fundamentally wrong."

Lathander scowled. "We are getting sidetracked with this talk of the Thayan. He is not my concern, nor Mystra's. It is the support for the follower of Shar we are angry about. Not only is she a drow, a inherently evil, dark-loving race, she worships Shar, the Lady of Night. That, that evil bitch enjoys suffering, enjoys the feeling of loss, of nothingness! Her followers either are the same sort of self-serving nihilists or blind to her evil!"

"So you label Drizzt D'Orden evil? Astonishing, considering most believe him to be one of the greatest heroes of the realm," Harry shot back, going on the attack a bit while not really addressing the worship of Shar. "Again, how can it be justice to simply label everyone of a single race evil. If Drizzt can become such a pillar of good, then surely Viconia has the same..."

"It is not the same at all. Drizzt denounced his people, was open about his heritage, and turned away from all of the dark gods and further, from Lolth long before coming to the surface. DeVir has only switched allegiance to Shar rather than the Spider Queen. That is a minute difference at best, Bhaalspawn," Lathander retorted. "D'Orden's actions show his sense of justice, his heroic heart. DeVir has no such actions showing she is worth letting you manipulate the process of Oath giving and taking as you have, let alone my sufferance of letting a worshipper of mine bring her back to life."

Harry paused, choosing his words carefully as he went on, feeling the pressure from before building up again. "Perhaps not, but just like Edwin, Viconia has yet to do anything truly evil. Her worship of Shar is also a simple one to explain. Alone, with her only ally turned into a drider, and the whole of the Underdark looking to slay her to gain favor with Lolth, is it any wonder she reached out to Shar in her grief and pain? Or are you saying any of you were in a position to reach out to her then?"

“Understandable perhaps, but not acceptable!” Mystra scowled a little and looking over at Tyr, not trying to acknowledge that indeed, none of the present gods could have helped Devir while she was in the Underdark. Even now with the Time of Troubles over, the powers of the dark gods would have stopped any such attempt, had the gods even been aware of the need. But unlike Ao, who was nearly omnipotent, none of the other gods could see all, especially in the Underdark, where Lolth’s power reigned nearly supreme, challenged only by Shar and the Mind Flayers twisted Master Brains. *“Damn it Tyr, he’s supposed to only speak the truth, not be so blasted eloquent!”*

Realizing he’d just scored a point, Harry pressed his advantage. “But if she was willing to turn away from Lolth despite that creature’s firm control of the Drow society she was born into, then perhaps, perhaps she can also eventually turn away from Shar entirely? Surely the chance to redeem her is worth the risk that a single drow represents?”

Mystra scowled – more pouted really – and made to speak, but Tyr held up his stump, signaling her to be quiet. The two locked gazes, but it was Mystra who looked away, bowing her head in deference as Lathander spoke. “THE PATH TO TURNING ASIDE FROM THE EVIL DEVIR HAS BEEN STEEPED IN HER ENTIRE LIFE WILL NOT BE EASY. IT WILL BE PAINFUL AND EXTREMELY DIFFICULT. AND IF WE DECIDE THAT YOU SHOULD BE JUDGED FOR VICONIA’S ACTIONS? IF WE DECLARE THAT YOU WILL PAY FOR ANY ACTIONS VICONIA TAKES? WOULD YOU BE SO QUICK TO DEFEND HER? WHAT THEN?”

At those words pressure built up all around Harry, pressing in on his mind, far worse than even at the start of this trial. It was like what he had faced when going through the gods in An Adventurer's Guide to the Gods of Light and Darkness had added to the weight gods’ simple presence. A choice, a decision that needed to be made, one that would irrevocably change Harry’s life.

“... So long as I am responsible only for actions taken while part of my party or around me, I would be willing to face such judgement. Viconia is a friend, and I’ve always in this world or my last, believed that friendship is one of the most important things in my life,” Harry answered, before going on, his tone turning wry despite the ongoing pressure on his mind and body... if such terms mattered in this strange frozen moment. “But that doesn’t mean I am willing to pay a price for actions outside of my control.”

“AND DO WE ALL BELIEVE THAT THIS, BEING JUDGED FOR DEVIR AND, TO A LESSER EXTENT, ODESSEIRON’S ACTIONS, TO BE ENOUGH? POTTER HAS WELL EXPLAINED WHY HE BELIEVES DEVIR WORTH MANIPULATING THE ACT OF OATH GIVING. BUT WE HAVE YET TO SPEAK OF HIS BLOOD MAGIC AS A WHOLE, WHICH WAS ANOTHER REASON WHY WE WISHED TO INTERVENE AS WE HAVE. TOO OFTEN HAS HE AND IMOEN BOTH SETTLED FOR EXPEDIENCY, USING THEIR MAGIC AGAINST THOSE WHO HAD NO DEFENSE AGAINST IT, AN ALMOST TYRANNICAL ACT,” Ilmater announced.

Here, Mystra did a one-eighty from her previous position. *"Now hold on! While I am somewhat furious that he has so often used his Blood Magic to help Devir, I will not here any word against his Blood Magic. I have approved of most of his other uses of it, and he is bringing more magic into Faerun from his realm, which I see as good. You especially shouldn't care about his magic itself, Imater, given how any spells he does comes with a penalty, causing Both Imoen and Potter to suffer for their magic."*

This the other gods had issues with, given the scowls they sent Mystra's way, and Harry noticed that once more, the gods did not seem to care about Harry's statement about having a 'last' world. The mention of his being an 'experiment' earlier in this strange intervention showed the gods knew he was not native to Faerun But after a moment Imater nodded, indicating she had a point, and removing himself from this particular debate.

As he did, Harry took the chance to speak up once more. "I only ask that you look upon my actions and deeds, and do not judge me simply because I am not like other, more normal paladins. I will not deny that my Blood Magic is a powerful tool, but I also maintain that I have yet to abuse it, save in keeping it secret."

"IN THAT, YOU ARE GUILTY OF PUTTING YOUR STRATEGIC NEEDS ABOVE MORALITY," Tyr warned. "AS A WAR GOD I PERSONALLY CANNOT FAULT THAT. A HIDDEN RESERVE IS ONLY SO GOOD AS IT REMAINS SUCH INSTEAD OF COMMITTED. BUT MAGIC TEMPTS, HARRY POTTER OF CANDLEKEEP. BE VERY, **VERY** CAREFUL YOU DO NOT FALL INTO THE TRAP OF SEEING YOUR MAGIC AS MAKING YOU RIGHTEOUS."

Translating that to 'be careful to not assume might makes right' Harry nodded. He understood by this warning that he might need to find other ways to help keep his and Imoen's Blood Magic a secret rather than relying on spells from said. *And maybe not be so quick with the spellwork outside of battles at all.*

"With Mystra unwilling to let us pass judgment on your Blood Magic, we can only admonish you on that score, but be aware that as a paladin, you will be held to a higher level of morality," Torm added his own warning to that of his lord. He had been practically silent throughout, simply staring at Harry, causing Harry to feel as if his soul was being examined from top to bottom even more than the others had. When he spoke, Torm's voice was the most normal of the gods there. "What is easy may not be the best way, or the most honorable. Remember that in the future, or else you will be in danger of falling from the life of a paladin."

As Torm finished speaking, Tyr looked over at Lathander. "DO YOU HAVE ANY SPECIFIC OBJECTIONS BEYOND THE FACT DEVIR IS A WORSHIPPER OF SHAR? IF YOU DO, THEN YOUR PRIEST IS MORE THAN HIGH LEVEL ENOUGH TO FIGHT HIS WAY THROUGH THE WOULD-BE PALADIN AND HIS FOLLOWERS, **NOR WILL ANY OF US HERE HELP POTTER AND HIS ALLIES IF IT COMES TO A FIGHT."**

For a moment Lathander hesitated, then shook his head. "I will abide by the judgement of the court. I would say he needs to be punished further for this act, but that is all. I was worried about his motivations, but from we can tell Harry of Earth has no ill intentions or interest in Shar."

Torm spoke next. "I am, **if not happy with how you have often resorted to your Blood Magic, at least** pleased by the loyalty you show to your companions. Your willingness to be judged by your actions is also a mark in your favor. I deem those actions not influenced by the shards of evil within you. Thus I do not object to you and the priest of Lathander exchanging the oath as you envisioned it. Keep to your word, keep your loyalty to your friends, and perhaps in the future you will find a duty fit to truly challenge you."

He disappeared, making Harry reflect that the gods did seem to like to speak with barbed words. That last could have been taken both as a warning and as a promise for the future.

Ilmater spoke next. **"YOU ARE WILLING TO SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR ACTIONS, AND TO SHOULDER THE WEIGHT OF YOUR BELIEFS AS WELL AS FACE THE THREATS YOUR BLOOD WILL BRING YOU. I APPROVE, AND WILL ACCEPT THIS OATH. BUT NO MORE."**

He too disappeared, and with that, the vote to let Harry continue to take Kelddath's Oath and not suffer for this was at least two to two. That removed a weight from Harry's shoulders.

Humming thoughtfully, the shard of Lathander nodded. A wide grin appeared on his face and a smirk on his features as he winked outrageously at Harry, his earlier confusion and ire at Harry's forcing his priest into the oath having long since disappeared. That meant to Harry the gods were for certain getting a lot more out of his responses than the words themselves. Even more than Harry's earlier thoughts on how they would be able to discern the truth would have indicated.

"Well, far be it for a mere god of light, birth and all the rest to gainsay the words of two gods of justice. I'm still not happy thanks to the woman's worship of Shar, and Kelddath will be free to demand his own price for this, but I will not stop him from giving you his vow, Bhaalspawn. Just don't expect to find many friends among my flock now or into the future so long as DeVir is in your party. Although I do hope your attempts to plow a certain blue-skinned field comes to fruition eventually."

Harry found himself blushing hotly, the implications of that statement and what it said about his inner thoughts towards Viconia hitting him with all the subtility of an ogre's club. Lathander laughed at that, waved his hand and muttered something about, "Nope, can't do that, I need to romance take it's course without being given a divine mandate, or else Sune and the rest will have my balls."

Mystra guffawed at that, although she still looked extremely angry. Introspective and controlled, but still very angry.

Harry's memory of the last few moments disappeared, and Lathander disappeared too, leaving Harry to wonder what had been said after the Morning Lord had agreed to let Kelddath finish his side of the bargain. This only left Tyr and Mystra. The god of justice appeared somewhat annoyed for some reason for a moment before the fragment turned its attention fully on Harry once more.

Before Tyr could speak, Mystra spoke up. *"When the plan was thought up to bring a random factor from earth into the realm of Faerun and try to tip the balance of power away from the evil pantheon so that another Time of Troubles could not occur, I did not anticipate your ability to use your own world's brand of magic, even in a limited manner as you can. I will allow it... for now, as it spreads magic further. But this closeness with the worshipper of Shar?"*

She reached forward a finger that suddenly shifted into a claw, digging it into Harry's sternum. *"No. I do not approve of that. Aspirations to change her might be fine for the old man and the rest, but I know Shar. She will never let a worshipper go, and most who seek to Shar will never turn aside regardless. I will let this one use of your Blood Magic to aid De Vir go. But in the future... do not expect such largess. Even my fondness for Gerion and the fact there are Harpers in your party will not extent that far."*

Unlike the others, Mystra vanished with a crack of displaced air so loud that Harry reeled.

As Mystra disappeared, leaving that warning behind her, Tyr stayed silent for a few moments before speaking up in turn. "FOR MY PART, I DID NOT TRULY ANTICIPATE HOW INTERESTING WATCHING YOU WOULD BECOME, HARRY OF EARTH. YOUR THOUGHTS AND WILLINGNESS TO BACK UP WHAT YOU BELIEVE IS THE MORAL STANCE ALSO WINS MY FORBEARANCE, IF NOT MY APPROVAL."

He paused then, and when Tyr spoke once more his voice sounded less formal, yet there was also a core of hard warning there. "SOON, YOU WILL SEE THAT THERE OUT THERE, TRUE EVIL, THAT WILL BE BEYOND YOUR METTLE UNLESS YOUR STRENGTH IS PROPERLY BRACED, UNLESS YOUR ARM IS GIVEN FURTHER STRENGTH. YOU WILL NOT BACK AWAY FROM THEM, THAT IS NOT THE SORT OF MAN YOU ARE. BUT WITHOUT THE RIGHT AID, THE RIGHT STRENGTH TO CALL UPON, YOU WILL FAIL THOSE TRIALS. YOU MUST CHOOSE, AND SOON, WHICH GOD YOU FEEL CALLED TOWARD. AND ONLY THEN WILL YOU HAVE THE WEAPONS, THE MIGHT TO FACE THE THREATS WORTHY OF YOU."

With that, Tyr too disappeared, and Harry was back in his body once more, a notification for the popping up in front of him in a color he had never seen before, silver copper and lined with emerald, the thing looked almost like a piece of jewelry that someone had hammered flat, and then written on. And as Harry read those words, some chunks of what Tyr had also said disappeared from his mind, never to color his actions going forward. Like Lathander, Tyr wished Harry to continue on without interference. After all, what good paladin needed his hand held? No, the blades of the Triad were such because they chose to be, people who would seek out danger on their own merits.

Those words read:

You were warned the gods were watching. Although they rarely interfere directly, be aware that the gods can do so if they wish, such as they would have in this case: a Bhaalspawn using a new magical ability to what could have been evil effect. Luckily for you, your words to them have seemingly swayed their opinion, and Kelddath will be allowed to make the Vow you asked of him. Indeed, the Triad seemed well pleased with your thought processes, if not all of your actions past and present, and have deemed you worthy of a minor reward.

Do not take this as unilateral approval, however. You still need to keep your side of this Oath, and if you don't... well, the use of the word DIRE will not do it justice.

You may now use one more Lay On Hands spell per day.

Across from him, Kelddath jolted, as if he too had been taken out of phase for a moment and returned. He shows no sign of having been part of the proceedings though, although he might have been given some knowledge of it, for he nodded his head, despite the scowl still present on his face. "It seems as if the gods have deemed your oath worthy of being given Harry of Candlekeep. Very well. I agree to my side of this bargain, but I will be paid in similar coin to Officer Vai. You will take quests from the temple free of charge. And you will have no further aid from us, either. This is a one time agreement. If you or your companions require healing or to be revived once more, you will not find such from the Temple of the Song of Morning."

Kelddath performed his side of the ritual, formally calling to his god to accept his new Vow. With that, the small ritual was finished, and Harry was hit by the cost to his vitality of the Ergo Fides spell. His vision swam, and Harry nearly fell to his knees, his health bar once again deep into the red.

As Jaheira moved forward and began to use her some of her last healing spells on Harry, Kelddath turned and without a word knelt beside Viconia, bringing her back to life with another Raise Dead spell. He then stood up then abruptly, staring at Harry hard, wiping his hand on his pant leg as if the touch of Viconia's skin had dirtied him somehow. "Farewell, Harry. We will not meet face to face again. I will send the two other quests we need adventurers for to officer Vai tomorrow. She can tell you of them."

Harry nodded, and it then proceeded to ignore the man, kneeling next to Viconia as she roused herself, instantly using his new Lay On Hands spells on her, even as Jaheira joined them, her own hands beginning to move in the pattern of a spell.

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As he exited the mansion, Kelddath found himself being hailed from one side.

"Kelddath! I'm glad I caught you, before you could do... anything rash," Vai of the city watch stated, eyeing the priest and the house behind him warily. "I sent a runner for you at the temple only to find you'd come here with Harry and Imoen of Candlekeep."

Kelddath looked at her somewhat crossly, jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards the house he had just left. "You mean like not sharing the... blue nature of one of Harry's companions with the townsfolk? You have no concern about that on my part."

Vai winced at that. "I was going to say that the town needs the help of an adventuring party, and if one is offering to take on quests for just the experience alone, its a major boon to us. But I am getting the impression Harry did with you what he did with me earlier?"

"You would be correct. I will abide by that.... Agreement, my God allowed me to make the Oath in the first place. So I will neither help him further nor hinder Harry of Candlekeep or his allies. Although perhaps, even though he did see Harry will regret this choice." He looked back over his shoulder now, almost turning in that direction entirely to do so, whispering, "Those who live under a fate very rarely live long healthy lives. And someone living under a twice fated star, as the Morning Lord said Harry did? No, his life will not be an easy one."

OOOOOOO

"Well, while I did not get much of that conversation, I find I am quite pleased to find myself still among the land of the living, Harry of Candlekeep," Viconia muttered, her voice scratchy and raw, which Harry was quickly coming to realize was a sign of the revivification process. He knelt and helped her to sit up a little, letting her lean against his knee and with an arm around her shoulders under her chin. She let loose a little mutter of discontent at that, but it faded as Jaheira and Harry went to work on her, Harry using one of his Lay On Hands spells on her while Jaheira used her last Cure Small Wounds spell.

Despite seeming to be somewhat composed, Viconia was quite shaken by the experience of dying. Not that she had any memory about what went on while she had been dead, no, it was the entire experience that she had issues with. Viconia had never needed to be revived like that before, and it happened so suddenly. One moment she was fighting, then the next, she felt her strength fading and she was dead before she could even try to cast a spell on herself. *Such weakness, such powerlessness, it is beneath me! If not for Harry, then I, I would be dead. I would have passed on.*

To someone like Viconia, weakness itself was a sin. That was why she had been so incensed to learn that she was so physically weak when Harry was able to see her stats with his AAS system after they had made their agreement. To have died because she was so weak was merely salt in the wound. A large amount of salt. *I will never let myself be so weak, never again!*

Hearing Harry and the priest's, short, bitter exchange, Viconia set that thought aside, shaking her head as she understood that Harry had somehow put himself forward on her behalf. Part of her, the part that harkened back to her life in Menzoberranzan and knew friendship was an unforgivable liability, was extremely irritated that Harry had done this for her for something so ephemeral as friendship's sake. Another side of her however, the part that had been woken up by her brother's actions and then nurtured by Harry's since they met, was

extremely grateful for it. *While I am devoted to my goddess, I am in no hurry to seeing Shar in person.*

Harry watched the priest walk away, then turned his attention back to Viconia, absently noting that he had just got in three different notifications. They had come one after another, almost melding together so quickly did they appear and contradict one another. In each iteration Viconia's Interest in him went up or down, then finally up again by +200 as Viconia seemed to finally settle on a positive reaction to Harry's helping her like this, although not to the extent Khalid and Dynaheir had done.

When she spoke, Viconia's words made this thought process plain. Or as plain as a drow exile would ever make her thoughts. "I am grateful for this Harry, but I find it concerning and strange that you would seemingly perjure yourself for someone you had known for so short a time. Yet... I do not find myself hating that side of you."

Lips quirked, Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I like to think that kindness to your fellow man should be something automatic. Doubly so to friends. And as for knowing one another for a short amount of time, I rather think it isn't the amount of time, but how fraught it was that matters."

Rolling her eyes, Viconia slowly pushed herself to her feet. "Well, so long as I am not actually harmed by such acts of kindness, I will not gainsay them in the future even if I do not benefit from it myself as I did this time. I would still see them as very foolish, but I will not object, and will endeavor to not think less of you for them."

"Ahh, progress," Jaheira muttered to Dynaheir smirking slightly in the background as the other woman also nodded, although she was watching Harry and Viconia through narrowed, worried eyes. Jaheira noticed that, and wondered at it, but decided to set it aside for now, clapping her hands gently to gain everyone's attention. "I believe, Viconia, it is your turn to take over healing our bedraggled band, yes? I am entirely out of healing spells."

Harry nodded at that, reluctantly pulling away from Viconia and letting the woman stand up. She did so, almost glaring at Harry when he made no offer of a hand, muttering about how Harry could be trained when he quickly pulled away. "I will do so, yes."

"Good thinking. In fact, use all use your healing spells on the rest of us and yourself. None of us are in the right frame of mind to even go looking for trouble, let alone a fight. We'll retreat back to the house we've been using as our base of operations here after Imoen and I explore the mansion," Harry ordered. "I know we'll need to leave a lot of the evidence behind, but we can at least take half of any money we find, and search for clues to the Iron Intake Issue."

Jaheira nodded, noting absently that Harry was getting better at taking charge automatically, despite the loss of Branwen in this last battle. There had been a time when they had first met up that Harry would have been much less authoritative outside of a fight than in it.

I approve of the change, although that is somewhat tempered by a worry that he will take it too far. Still, that is but a small concern given Harry's personality. "Agreed. But I thought that officer Vai said you could not remove anything from this house."

"She said we couldn't take any paperwork or move anything. That isn't the same thing as not taking anything. I think as adventurers, were supposed to be allowed to ransack the house like this after a raid," Harry said almost virtuously. "We'll only take half of whatever is here though in terms of cash or jewels, as I said, and make copies of any clues we find."

"I wonder if we could move in here instead," Edwin murmured, looking around. Everyone else there looked at him in scans, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I will admit that the dead bodies do nothing for the decor here, but even so, this is by far a better domicile than the hovel we have been residing in for one such as myself."

"While I do not deny that this mansion is larger, there is something to be said for the homey nature of the house we are staying in. There's too much space here," Dynaheir argued back.

"Bah, that just means we would be able to spread out, each of us having our own space and room. How could that be a bad thing? Certainly, I would rather like to move as far away from you as possible, Witch," Edwin shot back.

"Minsc would prefer a log house to anything else. Like the warrior houses back in a Rasheman," Minsc mused.

Shaking his head Harry decided to leave this conversation to the others, although inwardly amused that Khalid had just begun to join the conversation. "Come on Imoen, let's get this over with."

With Imoen beside him, Harry began to move around the mansion. First were the rooms they had fought in, the main hall and the dining room. With Imoen using detect traps to see if there were any traps, they would also have been able to see secret alcoves or anything similar. They didn't find any there, and moved into the kitchen and the servant's quarters quickly. Seeing nothing but regular supplies in the kitchen, they quickly moved on to the servant's quarters. There, they found eighty gold in each of the servant quarters causing Harry to ask, "So is that a lot of money, or little money, or what? I really don't have a very good idea of what is normal for, well, normal people in this world."

"Judging from the conversations I had with some of the servants back in Candlekeep, that's actually a good deal of money. Servants are usually paid fourteen gold a month if they serve a specific household. Although I get ya, as adventurers, we've got a really skewed idea of what money is worth," Imoen responded, taking forty gold and leaving forty behind. "I would say that this was probably part bribe, part threat. 'We're giving you all this gold, so's keep our secrets, and if you don't, well, we have all this gold to make you disappear' kind of thing."

“That came to your mind really quickly,” Harry observed quietly as he pushed the door open once more to allow Imoen out and they headed back to the main hallway.

Imoen shrugged uncomfortably. “Well, you know I was a Auror back in our past lives.”

“Training to be one,” Harry interjected with a snort. “Tripping over your own two feet a lot of the time while doing it, by your own admission, I’ll add.”

“I should never have told you some of those stories,” Imoen grumbled, smacking Harry lightly on the shoulder even as she continued on more seriously. “Anyway, while a lot of the purebloods might’ve tried to imply it was otherwise, money mattered far more than magic in our society. Money could make problems go away very easily if used to grease the right palms. That was what made the investigations that were going on right after your disappearance so amazing: because they weren’t being stopped by someone trying to bribe people the right people. Those bribes just became more evidence, and the people who took them just became more arrests.”

Harry grunted at that, although he found himself of two minds of this second reminder of their past world for the day. On the one hand, Harry had decided to, while not completely forgetting his past life, move on with this new one wholeheartedly. Thanks to the time loop in Candlekeep, Harry felt closer to this life, and with the memory of some of his mistakes and shortcomings in the last, Harry had taken the time to try and remake himself in many ways.

He had also become closer to Gorion despite the time loop nature of his life in Candlekeep than he had ever felt to any adult in his life. Harry knew that was a somewhat damning thought, but it was true, regardless. None of the adults in his past life had ever even tried to be close to him, quite the opposite in several cases.

And then he had become firm friends with Imoen once she joined him. By the time they left Candlekeep he was far closer to her than he had been even to Ron and Hermione. But on the other hand, he did still occasionally miss those two, and he missed some of the magic of Hogwarts. Even though magic existed in this world, it wasn’t used for so many different strange, fun things as it was in the magical world back home, which removed some of the impact in his opinion. It made magic more mysterious sure, but not as much fun.

Those thoughts took him and Imoen through the main room, where they found Jaheira trying to ignore the conversation going on about housing, and for some reason interior design. Khalid of all people was arguing with Edwin on colors, something that had Harry shaking his head and exchanging a wry look with Jaheira as she sat on the stairs leading up to the second floor, the far more pragmatic Viconia beside her. Yet even Viconia was interjecting comments, causing Jaheira’s face to start twitching a little. She even mouthed the word, “Save me,” to Harry and Imoen as they passed.

Harry shrugged his shoulders, and gestured towards the kitchen, whispering the word 'Supplies' in return. Jaheira bounded to her feet with alacrity and moved in that direction, leaving the others to argue.

Imoen was still snickering a bit of this little bit of by play as they reached the second floors balcony. Stepping over Brandi's body sobered them both up, however. The two of them paused beside their companion for a few seconds, heads bowed in a moment of silence. For Harry, despite Jaheira and Imoen's words of encouragement, this was something he had to put on himself. *I led the party into this ambush, I have to shoulder the responsibility for what happened.*

But he hadn't been as close to Branwen as he was to several of the others, so on a personal level this didn't hurt as badly as Gorion's death had. Imoen on the other hand, had counted Branwen as friend, the only woman in the party she got along with whole heartedly. They'd even flirted a few times, and Imoen would miss Branwen's easy going, blunt good humor.

After a few moments silence however, the pair moved on. Life was hard here, and Branwen wouldn't be the first friend they'd had to bury.

The guards hadn't thought to confiscate the bodies of the dead on the second floor, possibly because of how rattled Vai was about the agreement she and Harry had made and the whole experience. Most of the dead on this floor, didn't have anything on them. But as she examined the area with Detect Traps, Imoen found a trapped pocket on Tranzig sewn into the inner lining of his jerkin.

After a few tense seconds, Imoen foiled the trap and pulled out a small key, holding it up triumphantly. "This looks promising."

Item identification: mysterious key.

This key looks relatively new, and is made of steel rather than iron as normal. One side of the key has been etched with specific markings, so small you would almost need a jewelers' eyeglass to see them. There is no magic in it however, so the reasons behind the markings are unknown to you.

Harry repeated that aloud, and Imoen looked at them closely, before bounding back down the stairs, interrupting Edwin, Khalid and Dynaheir's argument.

"And your tastes are as plebian and cheap as one would expect from someone whose wife would prefer to stay out in the forests for decades on end! Can you not see that red and gold are the colors of royalty!"

"Leave it to a red wizard to believe that red is a good color for an interior. And I have always found gold to be a distressingly arrogant in terms of a color combination with anything else in a household," Dynaheir argued back.

“Are we attempting to put on airs, or are we attempting to create something that is comfortable to live in? You cannot have both Edwin,” Khalid agreed.

“Sorry to interrupt this all-important conversation, but I’m wondering if any of you can tell us what these markings are,” Imoen drawled, holding up the key while Harry waited above them leaning on the banister, his eyes wandering over the site of the battle for a few moments. From the introspective look on his face, Imoen wondered if he was once more brooding on if he could have done better. *Ugh, not good at all.*

Dynaheir, Khalid and Edwin looked at the key closely, with Edwin holding out his hand peremptorily. Imoen dropped the key into his hand obligingly, and he frowned slightly, commenting on the fact that was made of steel rather than iron, holding it up to the light and looking at the markings on it. “This is no writing I know of, and if I do not know of it, it is from far beyond the reach of Thay. So either something cross dimensional in nature, or it is not writing at all but a symbol of some kind.

“And you will note that there is a central image here, ignore the little lines and squiggles around it. They are meant to catch the eye drawing away from the main purpose,” Dynaheir advised.

Khalid held the key up to the light for a few moments, turning it this way and that, frowning slightly. “A, a actually, it almost looks as if t, t, there was one original image, and t, t, then another was carved on t, t, top of it. Strange. L, l, look, you can feel the difference in t, t, the indentations if you run your f, f, fingers over them. The original is s, s, slightly deeper than the one o, o, on top.”

“So a strange looking shield on the one hand, and a series of tiny what, crowns? The new design look like crowns to me,” Dynaheir mused.

From above came Harry’s voice, showing he had been listening as well as brooding, something Imoen was secretly thankful for. “The Iron Throne. Isn’t that what those Amazons we fought in the mines said? The Iron Throne wanted me and Imoen dead.”

The others all frowned for a moment, thinking. The line did sound familiar, although none could remember if it was the Amazons, the trio of female assassins, or Mulahey who had mentioned it. Not that it mattered, as Harry and his other party members saw a notification appear before them, which Imoen relayed to Dynaheir and Edwin.

The Quest Iron Intake Issue has been updated. You have discovered a Clue!

While you are no closer to figuring out the overall scheme or the resources of the group trying to draw the Sword Coast into war, you now have a clue to the symbols they used to at least identify themselves and a name: the Iron Throne. Both could come in handy in the future.

“So, we now have a name for the group you all are chasing, this new, hidden conspiracy that has gathered such power to itself as to threaten the Sword Coast.” From his tone, it was

impossible to tell if Edwin admired the Iron Throne for their ambition or not. “Strangely enough, without the Crown, the image of the shield looks somewhat familiar to me.”

Khalid blinked at that. “I, a, a, as well. Some I, I, large house or m, m, merchant guild. A, a, although I think it looks m, m, more like a spear t, t, tip.”

The shield in question was an odd shape. At first glance it looked like a kite shield, but looking at it again, it more resembled a thick spear tip, with a small, triangular portion at the bottom and slightly curved sides leading up to a corner whereupon two angled portions came together to a point at the top. Frankly either interpretation was likely.

Set this new information to the side as not immediately important, Harry asked Imoen to leave the key with Minsc before heading back upstairs. “Minsc, you said you liked to make charcoal rubbings once. See if you can get some of those images out on a piece of paper for us. If not, Edwin, Dynaheir, you two have good handwriting. Copy them out. Especially the squiggles. There might be something more to them than just obscuring the two primary images. We’ll have to turn that key over to Vai as evidence, but I want to have a copy of those little images on it. If we find anything appear that needs that key, well, we have Imoen, and we can always come back for it.”

Minsc gleefully took out a piece of parchment, laying it down on the floor, and pulled out a small bit of charcoal as well, before taking the key from the others and putting it underneath the paper. Whereupon he hastily began to rub at the back with the charcoal, with Boo squeaking encouragement from the side.

Harry and Imoen continued their exploration of the mansion, finding several chests full of jewels and money on the second floor. More importantly in the first guest room they found two potions, one of Strength and a Minor Healing potion. Harry supposed it must have been the room of one of the fighters from yesterday, maybe the one in full plate armor. “That guy was damned good. He nearly had both me and Khalid several times in that fight, and his armor let him just take a lot of our strikes.”

The rest was in a small, hidden storage room set cleverly between two guest rooms, hidden behind what Imoen called a valise and what Harry called a dresser.

There they also found a notebook detailing where that money was to be sent, although neither of them could make heads nor tails of it. It was all in code, to the point where even finding it didn’t cause a notification to pop up, which was saying something.

Harry posited aloud that this might be the money they were using to pay the various bandit groups, as it would make sense for that to occur through Bereghost thanks to its central location on the road leading from Balder’s Gate down to Nashkel and further down into Amn. “Still, all of it is just money, we’re not finding anything really important beyond that key so far,” he ended with a scowl.

Imoen nodded, and then brightened up, pushing Harry's shoulder playfully. "By the way, weren't you really close to leveling up again? Did that fight do it for you?"

"While I have to disagree with how you stated that, yes, I did level up," Harry drawled shaking his head. "I haven't looked at it yet, because I wanted to get everyone revived and finish this investigation first. And mourn Branwen," he ended, scowling and looking away.

But he didn't fall back into brooding, instead keeping his mind on something more important. "I'm really hoping something new comes up, some kind of tactical skill which would allow us to reveal hidden enemies. We got so lucky here it isn't even funny."

"Hey now! Aren't you being a little too harsh on yourself Harry? And on the rest of us too. None of us could have known what we were running into here, but bar Branwen, who, you'll note, decided to run forward without backup... again we've all survived a fight that should have killed us all." While she'd been very friendly with the woman, Imoen knew Branwen had a 'charge first, think later' attitude. "Now I'll admit having to revive and pay for the revival of three of our companions wasn't exactly a good thing but..."

"But nothing," Harry nearly hissed. "We need to acknowledge that we could've done better here, that we made mistakes. We should not have allowed officer Vai to get so far ahead of us, and we should have fallen back to the doorway instead of trying to fight out in the open of the main hall as we did. And none of us even thought of looking for hidden enemies until it was too late. We've gotten too complacent with my map's ability to warn us who is hostile and who isn't. Hidden enemies can screw us over if we can't do anything about them. And beyond that, we simply have to get stronger."

"Is that why you were so quick to offer that deal to Vai? Staying here for three months and so on?" Imoen asked.

"Yes. I figured that would be a good deal for both of us, and experience means more to us than money for the most part right now," he answered, pushing open the door to a new room.

This one turned out to lead to what looked like an armory, both a real one and one where someone could display important family relics, although the relics in this case were simply more weapons. Although small, it was lined with several cases holding various weapons, and Imoen quickly went around adding the arrows to their collection. Arrows barely weighed anything, and it was always good to have more of them around considering they had three archers in the party.

Harry did the same with a crate of slingstones, and then began to walk around, examining the weapons, looking to see if any were magically enhanced. "Why on the second floor? Shouldn't this place be on the first floor and therefore closer to where people would actually be fighting if the mansion was invaded..." His voice trailed off, and he stared at the one specific weapon.

“Rich people are weird,” Imoen answered, shaking her head as she finished adding the arrows in the room to her item space, picking up two potions, another Minor Healing potion and a potion of celerity. Looking around, she didn’t see anything that was trapped, so no secret panels or important weapons were stored here. “There isn’t anything more in here Harry let’s... Harry?”

Harry didn’t answer, still staring at the weapon.

You have been charmed...?

The weapon in front of you is so appealing to you that you have fallen under its spell. It’s raw destructive potential is filling your brain with blood thirsty thoughts. Your blood related father would approve.

The weapon in front of Harry was somewhere between a Warhammer and a halberd in length, and somewhat similar in shape. On one side of its weapon, it had a curved and pointed blade, almost like that found on a pickaxe, but obviously made to punch through much harder things than stone or the ground. On the other, a small - for the overall size of the weapon - hammer head sat. At the top of the weapon’s head jutting forward like the head of a spear was a thin, stiletto-like blade, coming to a wicked point.

All in all it was an unrepentently vicious-looking weapon, and Harry loved it. It looked like just the thing to shuck someone, like that fighter from earlier, out of his armor, and to do a lot of damage to anyone who didn’t wear plate.

Slowly, reverently Harry picked it up holding it first in one hand, then two as his identification skill went to work.

Name: Bec De Corbin

Like a warhammer that was originally intended for mounted knights or paladins, this weapon has been cut down in size to be used by a person on foot at some point in the past, and done so very well, without bothering the overall weight or balance of the weapon. A Bec De Corbin is a weapon designed to be used against armored opponents. Whether you want to pound their armor flat or pierce it, the Bec De Corbin is your tool of choice.

Due to the length of the shaft and weight of the weapon, the Bec De Corbin does 35% more damage to your opponent than a regular infantry style warhammer.

However, this weapon does have a significant problem. It is neither a halberd nor a hammer, but rather will call upon skills from both proficiencies to be used properly. Even this specific example, which has been shrunk down significantly, that remains a problem.

As you do not have any skill with spear or halberd, wielding this weapon will decrease your overall attack speed by half.

Harry repeated all this allowed in awed tone of voice that frankly was beginning to creep Imoen out, before going on. "I told you how much trouble both Khalid and I had with the one fighter who had full plate armor. He was a beast to fight, and getting through his armor was part of the problem. My magic sword only worked slightly, but even then, we had a lot of trouble with the bastard. But this thing gives me three different options to get through someone's armor! It's better than a warhammer for that!"

"Okay, I understand why you think the weapon could be useful. But could you please stop cradling it like it's a baby? You're freaking me out here!" Imoen shouted practically in his ears.

This seemed to shake Harry out of his momentarily paralysis, and he nodded, turning resolutely towards the doorway even as he rested his new weapon on his shoulder. "Right, sorry. Let's get this over with."

Finally, in what looked like a small office, Imoen found a trap where there shouldn't have been anything. This time, it wasn't a whole room, but instead a small portion of the top of a desk that dominated the room. A nondescript segment of the top was trapped to cause a fireball to go off, but Imoen was able to undo the trap. When she did, a small portion of the desk irised open.

Inside, they found more some papers. Once more it was in code, although to Harry's eyes the code looked entirely different. The first one was a lot of different symbols. This one looked like a combination of numbers, symbols and jumbled words.

"Great, just great. I hate scrabble," Imoen groaned.

Harry snorted. "Come on. Let's get back to the others. We've got a friend to bury, and frankly, I want out of this damn house."

Thankfully, Imoen had been healed back to nearly full health by Jaheira and Viconia before this, so she was able to use a minor spell she'd learned at Hogwarts to copy the paperwork onto blank pieces of parchment. With that done, the two head back to the others, leaving the originals for Vai and her investigation. "Not that she'll probably get anywhere. It's not like the Sword Coast has any kind of unified law or anything. Her remit stops at the edge of Beregost," Harry said with a sigh. "Still, I pushed her hard on the whole Viconia thing. Letting her investigate this stuff on her own if she can is a small price to pay."

"Anything to keep the woman from leading a mob after us," Imoen answered. "I only heard your argument with Kelddath, but that was enough. I think we really underestimated the level of hatred normal people feel towards the drow."

Back in the foyer, the conversation about colors and aesthetics had finally died down. Jaheira had also returned from ransacking the mansion's kitchen for supplies, reporting that they'd had quite a bit of salt and other herbs that she'd added to their stores. "After all,

eventually the amount you somehow absconded with from Candlekeep will run out, Harry. Tis better to think in advance before it becomes an issue.”

Harry chuckled, smiling at her despite the fact he had just added Branwen’s corpse to his item space. “That might be the most lukewarm but heartfelt approval for my cooking I’ve heard in a while, thanks.”

Jaheira snorted but smiled back while nearby Minsc and Khalid stared at the new weapon on Harry’s shoulder in interest. “Where did you find that magnificent weapon?”

Harry proudly held out the weapon, as Khalid explained what it was to Minsc, who also seemed quite taken with the weapon, stating that it looked decidedly dangerous. “Which means that it is excellent that we removed it from the hands of evil and villainy and will now repurpose it to goodness!”

The women simply looked on, shaking their heads, which Harry noted as Jaheira drawled, “Regardless of race, one thing remains the same. All men love their little toys.”

“I will have you know this weapon is quite large, and a woman who wields a staff and lovingly likes to caress it as we walk should perhaps not throw stones at the affection other people give their weapons, hmmm?” Harry shot back, causing Jaheira to scowl, and Khalid to laugh, having hit upon an old topic between the two of them.

“By the way, I noticed something earlier. You used one Lay on Hands spell during the battle, I believe. But did you not also use another one on Viconia once she was revived?” Dynaheir questioned.

Harry winced a bit, then sighed **as Khalid voiced his own confusion about what had been going on with the priest and everything there. The conversation about interior design had knocked those thoughts entirely out of his head.** But Harry knew his party deserved to know what had happened between him and Kelddath as Harry forced the priest into his Oath. **Well, most of it, anyway.**

After Harry finished explaining, for once, Edwin, Dynaheir, Jaheira, Khalid, and even Viconia were united on an opinion. That opinion was that this was not a good thing.

“T, t, there are many ways to s, s, say the same phrase, but I b, b, believe that the simplest one g, g, goes something like ‘those t, t, the gods take great interest in, t, t, they then screw over’,” Khalid said bluntly, shaking his head. “This is n, n, not good Harry. You seriously need to r, r, refrain from using any oaths, spell, or anything that c, c, could possibly draw the attention of the g, g, gods to us any more than y, y, you already have.”

“Maybe, but wouldn’t that fade once I decided on which God of Light I was going to pledge myself to?” At this point, Harry felt the decision was between Torm and Tyr, but he had yet to decide which. *Although I think sitting down and finishing that book during our stay here is a very good idea.*

“Perhaps, but perhaps not.” Edwin warned, looking like he was debating bolting. Indeed, Greater Observation told Harry that Edwin was seriously thinking he should leave the party early.

“The ways of Gods are mysterious, and while your... judges might not have ruled against you, they will certainly be a little out for ways to ‘test’ you in various manners. Much like the quest a paladin must go on, only far worse,” Dynaheir said.

“It is not something that we needed to deal with on top of the erroneously named iron intake issue,” Jaheira agreed, although looking reluctant to do so. Unlike Edwin though, Greater Observation told Harry that she hadn’t ever thought about leaving. Khalid had briefly, but only briefly. Viconia was even more wary than Edwin, but also unwilling to leave.

That was nothing to Minsc and Dynaheir’s response though. Minsc looked almost eager for the challenges to come, muttering loudly to Boo about how many villainous eyes Boo would be munching on. And Dynaheir?

Although you have no idea why, Dynaheir’s reaction to the idea that the gods themselves appeared to and judged you is close to vindication. She somehow believes that this is a good sign, both of your character and of the future. It is the last bit that is particularly confusing, but you cannot discern the reasons behind this belief.

“For my part, having any god of light looking at this party is not good for me personally. And it is a well-known fact that the more a God looks upon a person, the less that person will be able to turn away from the God’s teachings, big or small. If you do choose to follow one of these gods, you might be somehow convinced to follow their teachings, which would be directly against my presence among you,” Viconia said, biting her lip worriedly, although if she knew she was doing so Harry couldn’t say.

But of all of them, she was easily the most worried, almost to the point of being terrified at the mention of Mystra. That made Harry very thankful he hadn’t shared the whole ‘experiment’ or anything else on that score the gods had mentioned. And yet she had no thought of leaving the party like Edwin.

“Honestly, I kind of doubt that, given how the tenor of the trial, interview? changed after a bit. I don’t think they have a problem with you personally, or your race per se. It is simply that your race in general is also extremely... Well you know,” Harry said shrugging his shoulders.

The conversation about the impact this might have on their travels continued, while Imoen shared the goods they’d found with the rest of the party. Viconia was given the potion of strength that they had found in the first room on the second floor, while Imoen kept the potion of celerity from the second servant’s quarters and Edwin and Dynaheir were both given one potion of healing each from the two they’d found in the armory. If during a battle the two wizards took injuries, Viconia and Jaheira might be too busy healing one of the others were fighting, and both of them had much smaller health pools to begin with.

Khalid however questioned why Viconia was being given the potion of strength. "T, t, that should go to one of the frontline fighters, s, s, surely. I realize she is quite g, g, good with that hammer, b, b, but Viconia is best used in the s, s, second rank, where she can use s, s, spellwork and sling."

"Perhaps, but much like the healing potions for Edwin and Dynaheir, this is a just in case thing. Like Jaheira, Viconia's one of our flankers, but unlike Jaheira..." Harry paused, looking over at Viconia, who scowled a bit.

Yet even though she scowled, Viconia took up the tale, saying that her base strength was pitiable and made her unable to move in chain mail. "I hate that, but it is a solid fact that I am physically the weakest here, even counting Imoen and the two wizards."

Which meant that the Potion of Strength would allow Viconia to put on armor for the duration of a battle or deal out a lot more damage than normal.

At that, Khalid had to agree with Harry's point, and Imoen spoke up, pointing to Harry. "By the way, Harry here also leveled up during that fight."

"Did you level up your tactics skill or leadership ability?" Jaheira asked quickly. Those were the two skills that seemingly came with Harry's Advanced Adventuring System that she was most interested in. So far, those and his greater observation ability had been true game changers.

Harry open but after a few moments, up his level up screen shook his head. "No, nothing in leadership and nothing in tactics yet."

"I wonder if that is because we were ambushed here so thoroughly, and had walked into this trap so willingly," Khalid murmured, frowning slightly. "While we survived, perhaps mere survival would not be enough to warrant gaining points in those specialties."

"Well, regardless, we'll have time to figure that out while we stay here in this town."

Dynaheir made a confused noise at that, having been dead during that conversation, and Viconia frowned as well, actually scowling openly at Harry. "What do you mean by that, Abaloth? Staying here in this town is incredibly dangerous for me!"

"It would also have been dangerous if we'd been forced to fight our way out of town, which we would have if I didn't make the deal I did with Vai before I exchanged oaths with Kelddath," Harry answered with a sigh. He continued to explain that deal, and Dynaheir, Viconia and Khalid nodded reluctant agreement. They agreed that the deal he'd made was a good one to keep Viconia's presence a secret, and they all agreed that getting stronger was a good idea, although Jaheira and Khalid exchanged scowls when the conversation turned in that direction.

Both of them knew that they would not be seeing any advantage in staying thanks to the Curse of the Dread One. But they could not argue about it, considering that the others would.

Viconia listened to all of this, admitting that she was... extremely **pleased** that Harry was willing to go to such lengths for her. *Although is that because of friendship sake, or is he going to demand something more?* A dark part of her mind wondered, before she set it aside. Harry could well have demanded use of her body after they dealt with her pursuers for Baldur's Gate, but he had not. In fact, he had been nothing but friendly with her, reminding her more of how her brother would act around her most of the time. Bar of course a few glances center way that were anything but brotherly. But Viconia was used to those glances, and in point of fact enjoyed them so long as she liked the individual they were coming from, and Viconia had to admit that Harry was one of those.

Looking at his status screen, Harry put a point in halberd, which would allow him to use the new weapon without so much of a deficit to his overall attack speed. But after that, Harry turned his attention to the leadership page.

"Okay, once more we are faced with several different choices here. Most of them look more to benefit the entire party, rather than me personally, which is good, considering I think that is the role of a leader," Harry announced.

"Might I suggest that we continue this conversation back in our normal domicile?" Dynaheir interjected before Harry could go on. She was standing near one of the windows, and had just seen officer Vai and several of the town guard coming towards the house. "Soon we will not be alone, and this is not a conversation to be rushed."

The conversation between Harry and Vai was tense, and she glared towards Viconia will more than once. For her part Viconia stayed back, hiding near the deepening shadows within the foyer until it became time to head outside, passing the guards. And she kept Minsc and Khalid between her and the guards at all times.

Luckily for everyone, the conversation also didn't last very long. Harry told Vai where to find the documents they'd discovered, and Imoen walked Vai through some of the hidden alcoves they'd found on the second floor, before Vai dismissed them all, a sneer of disdain on her lips. "I will see you all tomorrow morning at the barracks. Thank you for your cooperation."

Whatever goodwill or feeling had been between them was gone now. But Vai was at least still willing to go along with the bargain that Harry had made with her.

By the time they had finished the conversation it had begun to turn into evening, and the trooped back tiredly towards their current residence through much quieter streets. As they walked, Khalid and Jaheira fell into a conversation in Elvish, Edwin Dynaheir and Imoen began to speak quietly amongst themselves, and Minsc began to debate with Boo precisely what kind of food they wished Harry to make for dinner that night.

This almost naturally caused Viconia and Harry to walk side-by-side, although they remain silent for a few blocks as they walked with the others.

And when she did speak up, Viconia made a point to lean upwards, speaking directly into Harry's year in a low whisper, her breath on his ear causing Harry to shiver. This was both to keep their conversation quiet, and because Viconia enjoyed getting a rise out of him and subtle manners like that. "I am wondering specifically how to grow stronger. If we remain here for a long while, could your Advanced Adventuring System be able to help in some fashion to figure out what kind of exercises and so forth work best to gain physical strength?"

Harry rallied quickly, shaking his head. "It's certainly possible, although I would've thought that you would have been perfectly happy with your body as it was. You certainly seem proud enough of it."

Now was Viconia's turn to flush a little, before she shook her head. "While I am no follower of that surface God who believes in bodily perfection, one should always strive to better oneself. And certainly to remove weaknesses."

Harry nodded, and promised that it was something that he would look into. "Imoen should also benefit heavily from that kind of thing if we can figure it out."

That was an understatement, and Harry knew it. Imoen/Tonks barely let a day go by without lamenting the loss of her Metamorph powers. Strength was one of the areas she was lacking in in order to use that power, Imoen would literally jump through a window into a house on fire in order to get it.

The first order of business as they entered the house was that the group split up along gender lines. The women instantly made their way upstairs, with Dynaheir promising to use a small can trip to warm the water for a bath. All of them were splattered with blood in various ways, their own or their opponents, and their clothing had taken a battering as well bar Jaheira's armor.

While this was going on, the menfolk stripped off their own armor, with even Khalid shaking his head as he unequipped his armor putting it in his item space, and then pulling it back out to set aside. "Good grief, would you look at the number of dents on it!"

"I don't think it's worth it to try and repair all this now," Harry said, examining his own armor, which had been rent in various places. None of them were as big as the holes torn through Viconia's chain mail, but it was still bad. The only armor that had come through relatively unscathed was the chest plate plus one that Minsc used. And his vambraces and gauntlets had been badly cut in place.

"Indeed not. Instead, Minsc would request that Harry starts dinner soon. Minsc feels as if his stomach is ready to revolt against the rest of him, and would that not be a tragedy!" Minsc bellowed.

"Minsc should start using his inside voice, if a simian such as yourself is capable of understanding such a difficult concept as inside and outside being two different realms," Edwin

retorted, shaking his head and moving over to one of the chairs nearby, slumping into it. "But I agree that food would be good, along with wine."

Harry looked over at Khalid and shrugged. "I suppose we could go get supplies, but before we eat, we're going to lay Brandy to work rest."

The other men sobered up bar Edwin, who simply snorted. He had not been close to Brandy, although respecting her physical strength. But to him, physical strength was nothing in comparison to strength of the mind, and in that, Edwin would always find his companions lacking. Nonetheless, he was with them when they and the returned womenfolk went outside into a small garden behind the house. Harry and Minsc worked together to create a long trench, and then Harry took Branwen's body out of his item space, leaning down and placing it within.

Jaheira then used her Druid powers to help bury the body underneath a tangle of tree roots, as she murmured prayers in Elvish for the departed soul. As she finished, Jaheira looked to Harry, indicating without words that he also needed to say a few words. *It is either him or Viconia, and that would simply not be appropriate. Especially not with night on us now*

Harry froze at that, but her glare was insistent, and he slowly nodded. It did make some sense that as the leader of the group he would need to say something, although much like stripping Branwen's body of valuables – something Jaheira had done back at the mansion - it had not been something that it occurred to him before this.

He coughed, scratching his forehead for a moment as he thought of what to say, then began. "Although none of us here share Brandy's faith in Tempus, I think we can all agree that she was a proud follower of the Storm God. She was brash, outgoing, effusive in friendship, deadly in battle. We only traveled with her for a few weeks, but I was proud to have called her my friend during that time, and witnessed her strength and courage in battle every time we faced a foe, be it monster or man. I am certain that Tempus will welcome her into the next life with open arms."

Even Edwin remained silent throughout the following moments of silence, although his expression was more sardonic than heartfelt.

The mood remained sober as the group headed back inside, with Edwin once more collapsing into the chair he had seemingly claimed as his own. The other men however traipsed straight upstairs to take their turn in the baths.

Looking around, Dynaheir murmured, "If we are going to stay here for months, we're going to need to make this place more livable for so many people. That means we will need to buy mattresses at the very least, or at least enough hay to make simple ones. And enough furniture besides."

Edwin perked up at that, and Jaheira rolled her eyes. "If you two interior designers wish to go to war on that kind of matter, pray keep the price down whatever you do. Just because we

received a large windfall from this battle does not mean that you are free to spend on useless frippery. Not when there is a very good blacksmith right here in town for certain.”

Harry came down then, having been the first to enter the bathroom. While the other men continued to clean up, he began dinner, which was a simple affair. Harry was in a mood to put in any effort, not after Brandy’s funeral. The others seemed to agree, and the meat, cheese, bread, and a thin but extremely savory soup went down a treat.

As they ate though, the conversation turned first to what kind of jobs they would be doing here in Beregost and then to Harry’s still as yet unchosen leadership upgrade. “List them out Harry, as you did after the battle with the gnolls,” Jaheira suggested.

Nodding, Harry did just that. “First, we have **Complex Item Box**. That seems pretty straightforward. I believe it would simply mean that we would all be able to access the same item box, although I’m uncertain what that would mean anyway considering that those of us my Advanced Adventuring System recognizes as being in my party already do so.”

“A m, m, minor upgrade then? Or s, s, something more, something we’re not thinking o, o, of?” Khalid murmured, using the last bit of his bread to wipe away the soup.

“That’s what I’m thinking too. Next is Shared Willpower, Greater Barter, and Battle Prowess. Of those, I think only Greater Barter is very understandable. It would obviously have something to do with trade, buying goods and services and so forth,” Harry mused. “To my mind, that means the choice is between Shared Willpower and Battle Prowess.”

“Battle Prowess also sounds pretty straightforward,” Dynaheir objected, looking fascinated. “Does it come with any greater descriptions than just the names?”

“It does,” Harry answered, then read off the description for Battle Prowess.

Battle Prowess:

A Leadership ability devoted to direct combat situations, Battle Prowess allows you to share one half of your total abilities with any weapon or skill among the party. For example, if you have a party member who cannot normally use the shield and sword combo, they will be able to use it at precisely half your own ability.

This is an activated skill. It has a duration of ten minutes, with a cool down of one hour. It can be used only on one individual at a time.

“Now, that sounds like it would be useful if events on the battlefield suddenly took a turn for the worse. And yet at the same time, it is an activated skill, which means you would need to physically be able to see what was going on, and direct the skill to the individual, Harry,” Dynaheir said with a faint frown.

“Unless I could use my map ability to somehow designate the person among my party who I want to use the skill on, I’m afraid so,” Harry murmured shaking his head. “It’s still a possibility, but not a very good one without more information about how it works specifically.”

Shared Willpower:

As a leader, you stand as a pillar taking on all those worries, concerns and trials that your party cannot face on their own.

Shared Willpower will allow you to share your high Willpower with your followers. If any of your party members are attacked by something that impacts their minds, you will instead be hit with it, with a penalty to your Willpower of -2.

Warning: Shared Willpower cannot be used on party members who are out of your line of sight.

This is an activated skill that lasts for ten minutes with a cool down of seventy minutes.

“A p, p, part of me wants you to g, g, go for that instantly, Harry. B, b, but that is because I know how m, m, much it would benefit me personally. I do not want you to make such a decision based solely on my own desires,” Khalid murmured.

“I have to admit that with this party, such a technique really isn’t all that necessary,” Jaheira agreed, looking over at her husband. Thanks to an old wound he had taken to the head, Khalid’s Willpower was extremely low, making him susceptible to Charm and other such attacks far more than Jaheira. It had caused them some trouble here in Beregost when they passed through the first time. Shared Willpower would be an immense help to Khalid. But the rest of them had very good Willpower. Well, bar Minsc, whose possession of Boo negated any such attack on him.

“In truth, activated skills like that which impact others rather than yourself seems to be rather a annoyance to use in combat. Especially for one such as you, Harry, who prefers to fight in hand to hand,” Viconia murmured. “You would need to be able to split your attention from your own role in the battle and overlooking the battlefield in total with enough attention in order to both notice when it was needed and activate it.”

“Agreed. Maybe if I get better at concentrating on multiple things at once, it will be a good idea but as it is? No, the combat situation would need to be perfect for me to be able to break off what I’m doing at the front lines, turn, and cast the spell on whoever needed it. All before the attack, whatever it was, hit.” Harry shrugged. “I could use it prior to the battle, but unless we go right into combat, the short amount of time it can be active for is a major hindrance.”

“Cast a spell, a good idea to think of it in that manner I suppose. Although it isn’t like any actual spell I have ever heard of,” Edwin murmured shaking his head with a faint scowl. “But that leaves **Complex Item Box** and Greater Barter.”

“True, but I remember what happened when we were looking at Harry’s leadership skills after the battle with the Knolls,” Imoen stated. “We found something about his map ability that made us all want to choose that, remember? I’m thinking that greater item box is going to prove to be the same kind of thing. But there’s something else too. Shared Willpower doesn’t mention it would only need to be used on one person, right?”

Harry’s eyes widened, and after a quick read through, he nodded. “You’re right, it doesn’t. Definitely moves it above Battle Prowess.” The others all agreed, even Edwin now looking intrigued, although he, like Dynaheir and Jaheira would not really need much help in that area.

With that, Harry went back to reading his level up screen.

Complex Item Box.

One of the worries about an Adventurer’s Item Box is that the size of his or her Item Box is dependent on the individual strength of the user.

Complex Item Box allows you, the leader to create a secondary Item Box, one which can be shared across the entire party, as defined by anyone who is travelling with you at either the Traveling Companion or higher relationship level. There is no limit to what can be placed within the Complex Item Box, as it has nothing to do with your strength, rather your status as a Bhaalspawn, powered by the connection to Bhaal’s power.

The Complex Item Box will upgrade as you grow in strength. How it does so may not be in ways you can easily predict.

Note: the distance is a direct correlation to the Leader’s level, one hundred feet per level.

Note: Class restrictions still apply to weapons equipped or exchanged.

Note: Strength requirements still apply to items equipped.

“... Holy crap is that broken. I mean, if we were thieves that would be insanely useful. Heck, it still is, considering how much our personal strength matters to me and Vicky.”

“If you ever call me Vicky again, Imoen, I will remove your tongue, pickle it, and then serve it to you in a meal,” Viconia growled, her tone deadly serious as she glared at the short thief.

Imoen shivered a bit at that and looked away quickly. Unlike when Branwen reacted to Brandy, she could tell Viconia was deadly serious in her threat.

“I agree. The Shared Willpower might have a larger upside in the future, when Harry is better able to use it during battle or when it will last longer. But at present, the **Complex Item Box**, a passive, is more instantly applicable.”

“Agreed. Like when I chose Specialties for my Tactics skill, I can only hope I can come back to this at some point,” Harry grumbled. Honestly speaking, he probably would’ve preferred to level up his Tactics skills. *Not that Greater Cohesion or Favored Formation would’ve done me much good in the ambush, but I have to assume that I would have gotten some more specialties to choose from. The leadership skills are a bit more... Pick and choose a guess? They each have obvious downsides to go with the positives... wait, is that a theme of being a leader? FUCK.*

With the choice made, Harry and the others debated on how best to utilize a shared item space like what Harry had now given them. All of the women folk in particular Imoen and Viconia were very pleased that their own physical burdens mattered not at all any longer, although Viconia was still quite annoyed that her overall strength remained the same. But the **Complex Item Box** was an interesting ability, one that had some unique potential to it, particularly in terms of their supplies, what they could do with them, and what Imoen in particular could do, as she had already made note of.

Harry was also interested in how it could upgrade. Could you, say, put a live person in there at some point? Or maybe add impetus to something you pull out of it? That could be an interesting offensive skill.

It had been quite a long day. Imoen was the first to yawn, but she was quickly followed by many of the others. Harry took this as a sign to end the conversation, and, after Minsc lost a quick round of rock paper scissors, everyone else headed to bed, leaving the Ranger to clean the dishes. Tomorrow would see the party start their grinding, as Imoen put it, and Harry wanted all of them, even the two magic users who were still not part of his party, to get a good nights sleep.

OOOOOOO

The next day, Harry and his party woke up with the normal message in their faces. Going from sleep to instant wakefulness was perhaps one of the best things about the Advanced Adventuring System.

Only the two wizards could not yet take part in it, but thanks to reviving her, Harry was **much** closer to reaching that point with Dynaheir than he had been. It was probably only a matter of time before she at the very least joined his party. Edwin was a little tougher to explain, but even there, Harry felt they could reach that point.

Regardless, Harry quickly made his way down the stairs and into the kitchen, determined to make breakfast for everyone. As he worked, he thought about what he had learned during that...whatever it was with the gods. The answer was, quite a bit, some of it he had no context for, but a lot of it seemed important. The fact he was here not just because of a magical mishap, but because of an ‘experiment’ was one thing. The whole Twice Fated was another, and not a welcome one.

Harry's thoughts wound around those points without coming to any set conclusion. And by the time the others began to troop down after their morning ablutions, they found Harry had created a veritable feast of sausage, bacon, eggs. This included something that neither Viconia, nor Minsc or Dynaheir had ever tried before: pancakes.

"These soft cakes are exquisite!" Dynaheir said biting into them eagerly. "Do you make these Harry? I would love to learn."

"While eating such confectionery would not do on an everyday basis, I too have to admit that it is quite tasty," Viconia mumbled, hard not to speak through a mouthful, but failing.

Of course, bacon was a natural hit all around, although Harry had to get in the tease in on Jaheira, her wondering why a druid would be so into it.

"Bah, I have always been closer to trees and forests rather than the animals within them. Besides, pigs are disgusting. Bacon is the best thing you can do to them," Jaheira replied instantly, causing everyone around the table to live, even Edwin and Viconia to laugh, although Viconia had never actually seen a pig in the flesh.

At that point, the conversation turned to what they would be doing today. Harry had remembered that he had a prior obligation already to the Paladin Stephen, but figured that Vai would be accepting of that, given the fact that ogres being near the town were a bad thing no matter who was reporting it. "So I think Khalid, Minsc, Dynaheir and myself will handle that mission. I really don't want to tempt fate by bringing you along Viconia, sorry."

"In that at least you have the right of it. While you are... tolerable, I've yet to meet a paladin beyond yourself that I would even try to get close to let alone want to be close to for a any length of time."

"But if you are not taking a healer, then I think it behooves myself and Viconia to use all or healing spells on all of the party to get you four up to full health. We re-memorized them last night, and between us I believe we can get everyone back up into fighting shape," Jaheira said shaking her head.

"And while I am by far the last person to wish to have someone direct my actions as if I were a mere peon, I have to wonder what you envision myself, the thief, the half elf, and the drow spending our time on," Edwin drawled.

"I thought you and Jaheira might be the best choices to try and decode the notes that we found in the mansion. The pair of messages we found need to be decoded. That's no reason not to keep on trying to figure out the next stage in our overall mission," Harry answered. "As for you, Viconia, I know you don't want to hear this, but you really do need to let Imoen or me change your skin color for a bit. It will make everything going on here a lot easier to deal with. And then you can stay here, or meet up with Imoen after she talks to Vai."

Viconia growled at that, and Harry simply looked at her sympathetically, but eventually, Viconia agreed. She and Imoen would do their part to work together with the local guard, doing any noncombat related missions they could until Harry and his group finished up dealing with the ogres and the Paladin.

OOOOOOO

After breakfast, the various groups went their separate ways. Imoen made her way to the barracks, where she found officer Vai. When the thief explained what was going on, Vai scowled a bit, before shaking her head,. "Fine, I suppose that makes sense. I've got reports of those ogres too. They've basically camped out on our nearest source of fish, which was a main part of our diet. If Harry and the rest of them can do something about that, we'll be grateful. As for you and your other companions, there's evidence of a pair of thieves berating in the town and..."

At that point, Imoen and the waiting Viconia – who was just around the block from the barracks - received a very minor quest to both discover who the thieves were, and arrest them. Because of Harry's agreement, they wouldn't get any monetary reward for it, but Imoen felt the two hundred experience for a noncombat related mission was probably pretty good.

The two of them met up and began to walk toward one of the taverns. "Although I have to wonder, since it's still morning, how much business the taverns going to be doing. We might be better served just going around the town, looking for anyone suspicious."

"I feel as if both would lead to dead ends. If these thieves could be so easily discovered, then surely even someone like Vai would have been willing to do the legwork to hunt them down."

"Even someone like Vai', is it? You really don't like her do you?" Imoen teased.

"Given how much she is unable to hide her distaste for me, I fail to see why I should hide my dislike of her," Viconia snarled back. But there was little bite to her snarl, and the two of them continued on their way, going from one tavern to another, listening to conversations.

Here they found some pretty interesting, perhaps even valuable information although it had nothing to do with their current quests. According to several off the merchants using the inn as a meeting place, they had just been cleaned out by a local mage who had just come home, a man named Thalantyr the Conjuror. He apparently was rich enough to own an estate eight hours walk away from the town. It was known he had several flesh golems as protection, but it was equally known he would sell his magical goods to anyone with the money.

"That sounds really good for us," Imoen murmured.

Viconia scoffed, answering in an equally low tone. "While I will admit to still having trouble understanding the monetary system up here on the surface, I rather doubt we'll have

enough money to pay for anything substantial. We were not exactly flush with gold before this latest battle.”

Scowling Imoen accessed the group Item Box, which included the groups assembled gold. “We’ve got... 1,928 gold. Enough to buy some things, but not enough to splurge. Thankfully, Harry already paid for the Ankheg armor sets when it’s finished. That and the medium shield... which we took off Branwen’s body along with the shield amulet. The shield’s not magical, but still worth something.”

Viconia nodded, saying nothing for a few moments before asking quizzically, “What does splurge mean? It sounds somewhat sexual in nature...”

Imoen laughed at that, her momentary gloom disappearing. The two of them continued to talk quietly while listening to the conversations around them. Doing so continued to drop a few nuggets of information, mostly about possible quests. There was a band of hobgoblins around to the east, a clan of gnolls to the west. A priest of some kind named Bassilius was also wanted by the Temple of Lathander. He was supposedly able to animate the dead, and had been attacking Lathanderite farms all around the area.

And finally, as the afternoon began, the conversations gave them a bit more information than Vai had already had about the thieves. There were at least two thieves, they seemed to be a male and female, and were equally able to blend into the local populace. Which meant the two thieves were locals. Adventurers like Harry’s book band drew attention regardless of whatever they tried.

Eventually, Imoen hit on the scheme of leaving small, trapped areas behind. This would look as if someone, one of the jewelers who made Beregost their home, had decided to hide their ill-gotten gains in small out-of-the-way areas near the district. Jewelers district.

With Viconia hidden under a series of spells and Imoen using Hide in Shadows, they quickly spotted the two thieves without being spotted in turn. Both of them were young human men and woman, around Imoen’s own age, but at least a few levels lower.

Still under hiding shadows and cloaked magically, the two of them snuck up on the two thieves, and knocked them out easily. Tying them up he took even shorter, and then they were heading back to the barracks.

“For all the trouble figuring out how to hunt these two down took, I could at least have hoped that they would put up some kind of fight,” Viconia grumbled.

“I didn’t take you for someone who enjoyed violence for violence’s sake,” Imoen noticed.

“I am not. But neither am I one that enjoys investigation or mysteries like following these two turned out to be. I could at least have hoped for the ability to get some of my irritation out on them,” Viconia snorted.

“Harsh, but understandable.” Imoen answered, then looked closer at Viconia, nudging her in the side. Viconia looked at her as if she didn’t understand what that move was supposed to mean, and Imoen sighed before shaking her head. “Right, different body language for different societies. My bad.” At that, Viconia nodded still looking confused, and then Imoen went on, asking, “By the way, what do you think of Harry?”

“Why are you asking?” Viconia asked, somewhat amused. “I was under the impression the two of you were not interested in one another.”

“I’m not interested in him, not that way anyway. But going by some of the looks the two of you have shared, you both might be interested in one another. And here on the surface, brothers and sisters, or family members anyway, always want to protect one another from bad romantic entanglements.”

Viconia rolled her eyes at that, but didn’t respond as heatedly as she might have, or derisively either. Imoen’s willingness to defend Harry brought back memories of her own brother, the only family member River stood up to her, and you helped to free her from their mother’s attempt to sacrifice her to the spider goddess. Whereas everyone else in my family, extended her close, had merely been sharpening their knives, hoping for their own chance to win favor.

“I am certainly not going to ‘romance’ someone. The very idea of getting emotionally involved with someone along with physically is foolish. But if Harry and I are indeed physically attracted to one another, and something does occur, I will follow through with it. It has been quite some time since I was last with a male, and it might be pleasant.”

Imoen scowled a little, but didn’t press the matter. She knew that even with her and Harry’s magical abilities to change her skin, the idea of Viconia entering a large city like Balder’s Gate was not a good idea. Particularly given the fact that the Flaming Fists might have been given a description of the runaway ‘murderess’ who their corrupt officer and guards had gone after. So if they had to travel to Balder’s Gate or any other city, and frankly that seemed a certainty at this point, there was no way Viconia could stay with them.

But even so, hearing Viconia simply sneer at the very idea of a romantic i.e. loving relationship, that annoyed Imoen. She didn’t say anything though, and the two of them finished their trip back to the barracks quickly. This time, Viconia went with Imoen to the barracks entirely, since Imoen needed the help to drag their prisoners there.

Once they handed over to the two thieves, the two of them were given a few other small tasks around the area, including trapping the windows on the mayors house. Although judging by Vai’s stare, the ‘disguise’ wasn’t working on her, and she did not appreciate Viconia’s presence. Still, she kept to her part of the agreement.

The guards had gotten reports of villagers unhappy at how Beregost had been suffering of late had begun blaming it on the mayor. Many had acted out, hurling stones and even

attempting to break into his mansion. With traps in the way, that would certainly discourage anyone from further attempts, and free up two other guards who were always stationed there now.

That took the rest of the day, and it was pushing evening by the time they once more returned to the barracks with their small mission accomplished and another four hundred experience points to both of them and the rest of their party.

They discovered something interesting however as Imoen worked on the traps.

Due to your continued trapmaking, your proficiency with this skill has increased by fifteen percent.

Your total proficiency is 86%.

This was accompanied by something else for Viconia which neither of them had anticipated.

While you have no skill or proficiency in Traps, watching your party member set them has proven to be the last thing you needed to earn a skill called Danger Sense. Built on a life lived in the Underdark and the cutthroat society of the Drow, you now have the ability to sense when danger is about. This will work in both social and combat situations.

You now have a 15% chance to see danger coming before it arrives. What you do after that is up to you.

Both girls eyes widened at that, and talking about it took them back to the city watch barracks, so much so that Viconia did not break off to wait for Imoen around the corner. Instead she stayed silent beside Imoen, letting the thief do the talking in case Viconia lose her temper.

"That wasn't bad work," Vai said begrudgingly, looking between the two women once more, settling her eyes on Imoen, as if the mere sight of Viconia's 'elven' features reminded her of Viconia's drow nature. "We'll have a few other smalltime things like this as the days go on, which you as adventurers might be better suited to deal with than my own folk. But in the main, we've got more combat related missions we want to throw you at."

"Fine by us," Imoen answered, so carefully not looking at Viconia, who was quite naturally stewing a bit. The mayor's majordomo who had let them into the small mansion, had frequently passed by in order to... Flirt with Viconia. And Imoen used that term very loosely. *Touching her ass in passing, trying to talk her up about where she is staying in the town and licking his lips looking at her is not how I would flirt, but look at the bright side. At least Viconia didn't gut the idiot like a fish.*

"Good. The ogre mission that the rest of your party is on is one, and I know that the priest gave you information on the wyvern to the northwest of here. But there's also been reports of a band of bandits somewhere nearby. Almost undoubtedly tied into the whole iron

intake issue. I think that once the rest of your band is brought together again, I'll be sending you out that way. We don't know precisely where they are, but surely, hunting them down is something you adventurers should be good at."

Both women nodded at that, although Imoen was surprised that that little bit of information didn't give them a specific quest. Shrugging that confusion off, the two of them headed to the nearby marketplace to buy ingredients for tonight's meal. It was the least they could do for being the first of the group to finish their tasks.

OOOOOOO

Hello

In stark contrast to Imoen and Viconia, Harry and his group's mission with Bjornin got off to something of a rough start. Because there were some things that even godly backed Oaths could not stop. And one such thing was the rumor mill.

The first thing that the paladin they were meeting, Bjornin, said to them upon meeting was, "That rumor of there being a drow in town has not gone away. I think there must be some truth to it. Perhaps after this mission against the half ogres we can see if we can find out what kind of dastardly plot this lone drow is acting upon?"

"What could a lone drow do?" Harry asked quickly, thankful for his Gamer's mind for the second time that day. The first had been letting him sleep without any nightmares from Branwen's death. And now it let him roll with the surprise of Bjornin's question and allowed him to not lash out at the anger he felt at the other man's automatic loathing of the drow. *Remember there really are a lot of issues between the drow as a whole and the surface folk.*

"Ah, but a female follower of the spider queen, my friend, can do a lot of damage. No doubt she is here to use her vile sensuous way to stir up trouble among the righteous," Bjornin said, shaking his head.

As the other paladin spoke there was a look in his eyes that told Harry that if any woman attempted to use their sexuality against Bjornin, he would probably succumb quite quickly regardless of his status as a paladin. "Regardless, let us take on these half-ogres of yours first. I assume you have your weapons? If so, we can go right now."

"Excellent!" The other man nodded, pushing himself off from the booth he had been waiting for them in. "Although I could've sworn there were more of you."

"We made an agreement with local guards to have some of our people help them with investigation type missions. This is a combat mission, so I brought along our best fighters and a wizard, Dynaheir of Rasheman."

The paladin nodded in Dynaheir's direction, who responded with a simple nod, somehow looking almost regal despite the fact that she, like Minsc, came from a society that most of the world would call barbaric in nature. "A pleasure to meet you milady."

The look in Dynaheir's eyes told Harry that the woman had caught Bjornin's earlier moment of introspection on the 'licentious' nature of the drow. "I understand that these half-ogres are to the west of town?" she asked instead of replying to Bjornin's greeting.

"That's correct. I was forced to run from four on my own but surely, altogether we will be more than a match for these half-ogres, no matter their numbers," Bjornin said, smiling in what he hoped was a charming way.

Dynaheir ignored this, instead turning toward Harry, who gestured at Minsc to lead the way. "Once we're out of town, I will have Minsc here lead us, he's a Ranger, and is our scout and trailblazer. For now, tell us more about these half-ogres."

Bjornin nodded, and the group moved off, heading toward the southeastern segment of town.

As they walked, Harry took in Bjornin's weapons and armor for the first time. He was wearing a chest plate, but no leggings, or armor on his arms, and wielded a simple hammer, without a shield. Evidently, while Bjornin had earned enough money to buy some gear, he wasn't able to buy all of it. Harry was almost tempted to give the full plate armor Minsc had taken off the fighter from the other day to Bjornin, but decided against it. Not only would Bjornin probably turn it down, but it was still back in the house in all its dented, pierced glory.

And frankly Bjornin's second comment on the evil of drow had turned Harry off from helping him anymore than he had to. "Righteous is not the same as self-righteous," Harry murmured, "but it seems to me as if far too many don't understand the distinction."

Khalid reached over to grab Harry's shoulder lightly. "A, a, and that my friend is a, a, an excellent point, b, b, but don't fall into the trap of n, n, not looking at your own actions just as s, s, sternly. The moment y, y, you cannot see y, y, yourself in a officious manner, that is the moment you s, s, start to lose yourself. R, r, remember, there are reasons behind c, c, certain prejudices."

Harry grunted acknowledgment, then changed the subject, understanding the older man's point but seeing no reason to dwell on it. *I know how most drow are evil. That isn't going to stop me from taking them as I come, like I did with Viconia.*

As they walked, Bjornin attempted to make small talk with Dynaheir for time, but when that failed, engaged in a conversation on different weapons types with Minsc, which the Ranger happily joined. Khalid and Harry also joined in, and the time passed somewhat pleasantly.

Once they reached the outskirts of the town, they quickly passed over the road leading from north to south, and pushed on until the house the last of the houses dotting the area was practically out of sight. Throughout that time, they only saw a few civilians about, even though it was midday.

"Is this because of the half-ogres?" Dynaheir asked gesturing around at the nearly empty fields. Two of them looked to be potatoes of some kind, the other she was uncertain about. But she knew enough about farming to know that those fields were ripe and should have had several people harvesting each of them.

Bjornin shrugged his shoulders. "I know that there have been some sightings nearby, but I rather think it's more to do with just the general chaos of the Sword Coast. People don't feel safe even on their

own farms these days. Bandits, half-ogres, kobolds, rogue Adventurers. While the talk of war might have started to fade, things are still very dangerous, and the town guards can't guarantee the safety of the townsfolk this far away from the central town."

"This far away... we have barely been moving for an hour since leaving the town proper," Dynaheir muttered, shaking her head. "Mayhap our staying is more than just obligation..."

"Minsc will always take any opportunity to put the boot to the butt of evil!" Minsc said at his normal volume, causing Bjornin to wonder what they were talking about. Harry had to scramble to explain why they were staying so long in Beregost, but after a Persuasion check was passed, the group continued on their way.

The journey took the better part of the rest of the day, causing Harry to wonder aloud if coming all this way for fishing really made sense. "I mean, how many fish would you need to take back to make coming all this way worth it?"

Khalid, Bjornin, and Minsc all laughed at that, while Dynaheir's shook her head with a resigned look on her face.

"F, f, fishing for most folk a, a, around here isn't about t, t, the table, mostly," Khalid explained. "There w, w, will be some like that, the o, o, ones who actually own b, b, boats, nets, who are s, s, serious about it. But most s, s, simply come out here to w, w, wile away the time."

"Time," Dynaheir interjected, "that their wives or significant others might wish them to fill with more productive things,"

"F, f, fishing is meditation. It h, h, helps one center o, o, oneself." Khalid argued back.

As Khalid and Bjornin began to argue with Dynaheir on that point, Harry hummed. "Huh, I wonder if that could be right."

Minsc looked at him, and Harry shrugged, saying in a low tone. "Remember, Viconia asked me to look into ways to boost our basic stats. If meditation works to boost wisdom, it could be interesting." *Even if Khalid won't be able to benefit from it.*

To that, Minsc nodded, humming thoughtfully. "Minsc remembers the many exercises Minsc did as a youth to build is strength. If..." Boo took a moment to bite Minsc's ear, and Harry snickered as Boo squeaked into Minsc's ear for a second, and then Minsc went on sheepishly. "if the pretty elf wanted to raise her strength stat, Minsc has a few ideas."

"Sounds good. So we have two possible things that might raise our stats then," Harry nodded. "For now though, we've left civilization behind. Be on guard, yeah, big guy?" He raised his voice and remonstrated with the others. "That goes for all of you too. Leave the discussion about the real purpose of fishing for another time."

Chastened the others nodded and turned their attention outward once more.

Thankfully they didn't run into any trouble for the next few hours and it the sun was setting by the time Bjornin reported they were in the area where he had clashed shoulders.

Moments later, Minsc paused the group, kneeling down to look at what appeared to be a small puddle of ochre. "Hobgoblin blood," Minsc said, pointing at the puddle. "Hobgoblin blood is among the most distinctive of colors. It always reminds Minsc of paintings he made while as a child with his fingers."

"I would recommend not doing so now," Dynaheir drawled, before looking over to her bodyguard. "Do you see anything else?"

"Signs of humans coming and going, only one hobgoblin though," Minsc answered quickly, pointing to a few broken branches on the trail they were following, which indicated that in the recent past, people had been passing in both directions from their current position. "Minsc does not see any sign of half-ogres yet, although the one hobgoblin is a mystery. Most hobgoblins travel in groups."

Harry frowned a little. "And you're not seeing more than one track, you're certain?"

Minsc nodded, and Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Then mystery or whatever, it's not our problem right now, not unless we get . But since were getting close, Minsc, go ahead of the rest of us. We'll keep going in this direction."

"A most excellent thought, friend Harry! It is indeed time for sneaking!" With that, Minsc activated his Hide In Shadows. To Dynaheir and Bjornin this meant he disappeared entirely. But both Khalid and Harry could still see Minsc's position on the map. With Bjornin beside him, Harry took the lead, Khalid falling back next to Dynaheir, quickly stringing his bow and putting an arrow out of his quiver.

Soon, Minsc had extended the map to the point he was at least a quarter mile ahead of them, racing through the trees silently in a way that none of their party bar Jaheira matched. The three currently present party members, or rather, two party members, one traveling companion, and one temporary ally, trailed behind him.

Harry noticed instantly when Minsc's green dot paused. And a few second alter, he could see a red dot at the outskirts of the map. He couldn't quite see through Minsc's eyes, but the expanded map ability worked wonders here just as it had back in the mines. Quickly, Harry got the group to move a little faster as Minsc began to head back to them. "We're near the water, I can almost smell it. I think we need to meet up with Minsc just in case."

Bjornin seemed to take this at face value, while Dynaheir nodded, unable to partake of the map as Khalid could. Moments later, Minsc came out of the forest disengaging his Hide in Shadows skill. "Minsc has found them. Ten half-ogres. Minsc believes they move around this area, using the lake as the center of their territory. Like humans, ogres enjoy fish, if there is nothing else available. It is smart of them then but ten is a little more than we were told about."

Harry shrugged. "Were getting paid for each ogre, remember?" he said, looking over at Bjornin, who nodded, looking both gratified and annoyed that there were more than before. "However, we're going to have to plan this out carefully. We're going to ambush them, and to do that, I'll need a good idea of the lay of the land."

Minsc nodded. "That will be easy enough to do friend Harry. The ogres have stopped for the night around a large fire. They were cooking a deer, the smell of which will make their noses useless, and make it easier to sneak up on them. Minsc would prefer not to do such an eatery, but against foes like this, even Boo agrees with the plan of ambush."

The group moved forward again, this time together, until they were had moved around the lake, which Harry could still see through the forest, a small glimmer of reflected light. There they paused once more and Minsc again left the rest, heading forward. He quickly came back and began to tell Harry more about the area. Within minutes Harry had a plan and began to lay it out for the others. Bjornin looked a little bemused at how quickly Harry had taken control, but went along with plan willingly.

Moments later, the group was moving again, with Bjornin and Dynaheir together, much to Dynaheir's chagrin. But Bjornin couldn't Hide in Shadows, and Harry refused to use his magical abilities in front of him. The moment he and Khalid were away from where Bjornin Dynaheir slowly creeping through the woods, though, Harry used his magic on the two of them, causing both of them to disappear from sight. The hit to his health was minor, and Harry smiled. *Thank god for the progress we've made with figuring out magic.*

Khalid nodded at the other man, then ran off through the woods quickly. He and Minsc set up with one side, while Harry would come from another. Then Dynaheir and Bjornin would come from a third. This was somewhat similar to the setup Imoen, Khalid, Jaheira and Harry had used when they had found that kobold spawning point, but the repetition didn't invalidate the plan. Especially since this time, Harry would be set up on a large rock overlooking the half-ogres.

True to form, Dynaheir's timing was incredibly good. Harry was barely in position when a Stinking Cloud spell flashed from one side of the half-ogre camp into the center of the group. Several failed their Wisdom saves and the others all bellowed jerking to their feet from around the fire where they had been sitting.

Harry had perched himself on top a rock to one side of the camp, which might have been the reason why the ogres had chosen it. It might have seemed as if the rock was large enough to guard the flank. Harry disabused that notion when he lobbed a hammer down from on high, which crashed into the top of an half-ogre's head from behind.

Critical hit: You have achieved a critical hit. The target is dead.

From the other side of the camp two bows twanged. Minsc and Khalid kept their distance, using their ability to fire through the woods as the ogres seemed to mill about. After a few minutes the ten half-ogres began to break apart, chasing in every direction. Three of them turned, trying to claw up the side of the rock Harry was perched on.

"Time to see if my new toy works..." Harry grinned, and pulled out the Bec de Corbin. The weapon gave him a longer reach, and three ways to hurt people, a win-win in his mind.

Th stabbing point of the Warhammer also was able to cut someone quite effectively, cutting off fingers of the climbers as they neared. Harry grimaced though. The lack of speed on the weapon is somewhat annoying, but I suppose that can be overcome with training." The next second, the pickaxe of the Bec de Corbin took a half-ogre in the side of the head, punching straight through flesh and bone alike, far better than even Harry's magic sword would have thanks to the science of momentum and weight. "OOO, but I do like it regardless."

Another spell from Dynaheir struck then, and more half-ogres fell unconscious to the smog.

Two of the half-ogres then went down to two more arrows, and the paladin charged forward from Dynaheir's direction shouting out "For Torm, and justice!"

Harry jumped down from his perch to join him, trusting in his Willpower against the noxious fumes. *Although how the hell Bjornin thinks he can I... huh.*

To Harry's surprise, Bjornin proved able to fight in the area affected by Dynaheir's spell. And as another spell, this time Magic Missiles flashed into one half-ogre, Bjornin down another, then turned to finish the wounded half-ogre off.

Meanwhile, Harry's new weapons stabbed deeply into a thick, powerful neck, then Harry was twisting around, bringing the hammer down down into the foot of another half-ogre. That worthy howled in agony as, and then died gasping as Harry sent his weapon upwards into it's chin and then up into it's brain.

Moments later, the battle was over. Taken off guard, with half their number succumbing to the smog, the half-ogres stood no chance despite their massive strength. *And that children is why armor and teamwork is important*, Harry thought, shaking his head.

And then his vision filled with a notification which caused Harry's eyes to widen so much he resembled an owl.

Congratulations. You have successfully attempted an ambush! From out of the forest you came, dealing death and destruction. You have successfully led your party and its allies, both long-term temporary in a successful battle.

You have accrued +200 leadership experience points.

Note, leadership points will vary depending on what kind of combat you lead your people in. You can also, as you know, earn leadership points through acts outside of combat.

Harry was astonished. Before this, he hadn't actually seen his leadership points accruing like this before. He knew he had earned them, but he'd only seen his Leadership level increase. *But now... supposedly because of my level up, I can.*

That was an interesting and very welcome development. It meant he could actually log his progress, rather than simply have it announced after-the-fact. *And that makes at least three ways we can, as Imoen put it, grind. Oh yes, this is going to be a very productive three months if I have anything to say about it.*

"All in all, a very good day," he said aloud. "Now, I believe we had a mystery of a single injured hobgoblin around here somewhere?"

End Chapter