

**BSo, I kind of had trouble stopping this fic where it is, but it made way to much sense to keep going and showing the rest of the group's interactions with Viconia, but tell me what you think about her and Harry's interactions. I think I made her a okay mix of prickly, demanding and insular yet with a decent sense of humor, but I would like your opinions.**

**I also saw a reviewer over on fanfic mention that Harry should have leveled up after the dungeon. Nope. He's a level seven paladin folks, that means he needs 75,000 experience to level up. Now, does that mean he won't grow? Well, you will have to see for yourself.**

**In other news, I haven't gotten a response from Morde24 about the latest ATP chapter I sent him, but as I asked him to tell me by last weekend if he felt he could edit it, that is probably a good sign. The marriage lemon is mostly written and can just be plugged in when I get the chapter back. I will also be posting the response to the small story poll later today... I am having thoughts there... And I should have time this weekend to finally get back into the long term tactics/strategy discussion, which will be nice.**

**This hasn't been edited by anyone but me. Not even Grammarly – the addon is being a bitch for some reason. Going to get to the bottom of that, but I wanted to post this here quickly. I would also recommend that you all use the document version if you can! I have added several new font/style changes in this chapter, the type of thing I had hoped to do over on A03. I'm still struggling there.**

### **Chapter 11 New Revelations, New Allies, Big Problems**

Much to Imoen's chagrin, Harry and Jaheira turned out to be quite a ways further away than she had hoped anyway. She and the rest of their party had been traveling in the direction of the Point me spell, which Imoen checked every time they had to move around some natural obstacle, hadn't deviated at all. They had been forced to make camp a day out from Nashkel while it was raining out, and hadn't been able to find any cave, or even any trees they could use as cover. There were trees around, but they were spindly things, with few branches to them and not nearly enough in the way of cover for the adventurers. The best they had been able to do was Minsc using his large cloak and a few bedrolls to make a kind of tarpaulin between two rocks for them to hide under.

In other words, it had been a damn miserable night. Made worse by the message the Advanced Adventuring System popped up into Imoen's face when she woke up.

**With both the threat of enemies around and uneven terrain, you have had a fitful night's rest.**

**Only half of your endurance has been returned. Spells have not been memorized.**

Despite the message though, Imoen felt like she slept fine. She hopped to her feet energetically, cracking her neck and shoulders as he stretched, preparing a cold breakfast. Minsc and Khalid both woke up similarly energized, getting to their feet and speaking quietly before Khalid left the camp, heading out with his bow in hand to see if he could find something to add to their larder. Meanwhile, Minsc, with Boo on his shoulder, moved to unhook the makeshift tarpaulin over their equally makeshift camp.

Branwen and the two magic users had a harder time of it, coming awake somewhat groggy and annoyed at the noises the three party members were making. Branwen pushed herself upright against one of the rocks, then with a sigh got to her feet, helping Minsc with the tarpaulin, shooing the two magic users out of their bedrolls with threats of dripping water on them.

The two magic users glared at her but began to move and Branwen turned to Imoen. "In truth, I believe when we were talking about the powers your Advanced Adventuring System gives you and your party members Imoen, we missed one of the most important ones. I do not know about the rest of you, but I have served in various warbands before this. The ability to get a good night's sleep regardless of how long or short the night would have been a positive godsend at times."

"Pun unintended I hope. One would think even a blonde barbarian warrioress would not stoop to the lowest form of humor," Edwin muttered, pulling a special mug out of one of his pouches and taking a sip. The special mug was one of the few truly enchanted items he had on his person. With a whispered incantation, the mug heated the concoction within up until there was a faint steam coming from its small opening, and he drank from it greedily.

Dynaheir looked at him, at his cup, then bit her lip and turned away. There was no way she was going to let the smug Thayan know she was irritated by the fact that he had what looked like tea in the morning and she wanted some. Instead, she latched onto Branwen's observation. "True. But there is something else as well. Now that the secret is out Harry and Imoen will no longer have to hide their Blood Magic spells. And when we rescue Jaheira and Harry from whatever trouble has undoubtedly found them, we will have two healers as well. I will assume therefore that you would be willing to use more spells from now on?"

"While I am extremely interested about these Blood Magic spells and what they tell us about the very nature of magic, I would caution you against profligate use. If we are in a village or town, I would say that using them would be atrociously stupid. Tongues wag, and the speed of your incantations and indeed the spells themselves would stick in the mind of anyone who knew even the tiniest bit about how magic is usually done. The last thing you want to do is to have well the red wizards like myself decide that you have become interesting enough to dissect," Edwin warned.

"Oh look, he does care," Imoen taunted, winking at Edwin.

The red wizard rolled his eyes. "Child, there is only one individual Edwin Odeseiron cares about, and that is Edwin himself. You and your brother have been both fascinating and admittedly not entirely horrible traveling companions, but do not forget that I am in this for my own self-interest and curiosity."

"And there go my warm and fuzzy's. But in answer to your question Dynaheir, yeah, I would be willing to experiment, and for sure I'm going to continue using them as we need going forward although Edwin is right about not wanting to have any witnesses. An ace in the hole is only so good as you're able to hide it from your enemies, you know? And we've seen signs all along that the big bastard who is after my brother and I have connections in a lot of places. Further, I... don't know about really experimenting once we get Jaheira back. The blood mage spells take so much of our life out of us, that even if its Harry's the one doing the experimenting, one out of every three healing spells told have to be used on him to keep them going."

Coming back then, Khalid shook his head, indicating that he had not found any sign of animals nearby. How far he went was an open question as he'd only been gone for five minutes if that, but the look in his eyes and the sight of his twisted into an anxious grimace was such no one questioned it. "L, l, let's get g, g, going. T, t, the sooner we find my wife and H, H, Harry the better."

Dynaheir and Minsc and Branwen all argued back that they should wait until he had some breakfast and after a second, as the de-facto leader, Imoen decided to let them take some time over their breakfast. "It will be our only warm meal for the day, and it's not like any of us are cooks like Harry, Khalid. Better to start the day with as good a meal as we can have."

This consisted of warm gruel, basically, although with fresh fruit, strawberries and raspberries they had bought along with strips of cooked chicken meat from Nashkel. Not a candle on anything Harry had made while out in the wild, which Edwin pointed out every other moment. Something that Imoen would have found annoying if she wasn't thinking the same thing. As they cleaned up, she quipped, "Well, food is just another reason to find our wayward swimmers quickly, you know? So let's get going."

Near midday, while still following the point me spell they came upon their next obstacle. This took the form of a wide chasm in the ground, spreading from one horizon to the other directly across the path the point me spell pointed. Minsc examined it closely, conferring with Khalid, who stared around him, seeing further than the others could thanks to his half-elven eyesight. "Khalid and Minsc are in agreement. Both of us have seen such things before, and given the size of the crevice, we believe that the chasm starts a little ways to the north. If we go that way, we will be able to get around it faster."

"How long out of our way will that take us, and what kind of terrain would we find? We've been oddly lucky so far; our route going forward hasn't been all that difficult despite that

waste of simian seed Greywolf and his minions attacking us as they did,” Edwin snorted, shaking his head.

“I agree with Edwin,” Imoen said, looking over at Branwen. “And we do have a healer right here after all.”

Branwen looked at her quizzically a but instead of explaining, Imoen looked back at Minsc and Khalid. “I don’t suppose either of you are afraid of heights?”

Both of the warriors looked at one another in confusion then Imoen pointed at Minsc, intoning, “Wingardium Leviosa.”

**You have used the Leviosa Blood Mage Spell on a heavy object.**

**-25 to Health.**

Without a word, Minsc began to rise into the air, causing him to whoop in shock. “What is going on?! What magic is Imoen casting on this poor ranger and his mighty friend? Boo is an adventurous Miniature Giant Space hamster and is enjoying being weightless, but Minsc very much prefers to have his mighty feet on the ground!”

“Hang on Minsc, this won’t take long.” As the others watched, Imoen moved her arm around in a half-arc with Minsc following the movement of her hand through the air.

“I do not like this at all, no not at all! DO not drop mighty Minsc, please, Imoen!” The ranger babbled his arms flailing while Boo clung on to his shoulder. “Boo can only comfort Minsc so much.”

Imoen’s arm movements directed the spell, taking him out over the chasm, and then across the other side as Imoen made little pushing motions with her hands sending him further away. Soon he was on the other side, his monologue having not stopped since Imoen and lifted him off the ground.

“Make sure there’s no other monsters or anything around Minsc. I’m going to send over Dynaheir, then Khalid, then Edwin and finally Branwen,” Imoen announced.

Edwin had watched all this, both intrigued by the efficacy of the spell, and how quickly Imoen had been able to use it just like all the other blood mage spells. Although he was not looking forward to actually crossing. It looked most undignified, flying under someone else’s power like that. *Just add it to the numerous reasons you have to become stronger in magic Edwin, so that you can fly under your own magical might rather than someone else’s. Especially a talented amateur like Imoen who has seemingly just stumbled onto an entirely new school of magic.*

Dynaheir on the other hand was a little disturbed as Imoen explained how much of her health points that had taken. “I am wondering if had to attempted to lift us all at once, if that

spell would have killed you. Your Blood Mage spells are inherently different from magic of the sort the Thayan and I use. Indeed, you are more Sorcerer than Wizard, but unlike them, your magic comes from your own blood rather than an inherent connection to the weave.”

“Ah, but the breathe of what Imoen and her fellow Bhaal-child can do is far wider than those dilettantes,” Edwin demurred. “And we have already determined that their spells are not as singular as a Sorcerer’s is.”

Each Sorcerer’s spells were different in some fashion even though the actual result of the spell might seem similar. Then again, that rarely mattered. A fireball was a fireball regardless of the color of the flame. A spell to teleport the Sorcerer out of danger worked, even if they had to move their hands in a specific fashion or shout an activation arcana.

“Oy, you know I don’t like hearing people talk about the murder-hobo. As to your question Dynaheir, it might have. That’s why I said Harry would have to be the one to experiment,” Imoen grumbled, shaking her head. “I seriously need to put some more points into my endurance, and hope that helps my health pool.”

“If you all could stop talking, and Imoen could send me my witch across? I am becoming anxious given my place on this side of the chasm in comparison to my charge. Besides, if lifting Minsc took so much out of you, then lifting a Witch such as Dynaheir should be easy. All of Rasheman know witches are as light as feathers!” Minsc bellowed from the other side.

Edwin and Khalid both chuckled at that, while Branwen guffawed. But Dynaheir took it in stride, stepping forward, while pointing a finger towards Branwen and Khalid. “That is actually a good point. If the weight of the object you move must have an impact on how much magical life force it takes out of you, then we all need to be as light as we can going over.”

Seeing her point at once, both Branwen and Khalid divested themselves of their armor and weapons quickly. Dynaheir flew over, even going so far as to hold her arms against her side so as to go a little faster, smiling somewhat at the sensation of flight. Khalid went next, acting almost as rigid as a board, holding his arms against his sides as he stared around his eyes almost wildly moving in his head while a little whimper came from him as he crossed over the gorge.

And to Branwen and Imoen’s astonishment, Khalid without his armor weighed just as much as Dynaheir. The half elf just didn’t have the size or powerful muscles of a human man at the same level. Soon though he was on the other side, and thanks to the party’s ability to use their items space more effectively, was instantly armed and ready for combat. The same would not be said about Branwen when it became her turn.

“Dynaheir was right, as I figured she would be,” Imoen muttered as Branwen used another healing spell on her, breathing easier as the spell hit. “Moving Minsc like I took twenty-five health, moving Dynaheir took five, moving Khalid without his armor the same. I should have thought of that before trying to lift Minsc the first time.”

“I will wager that I will be a bit more than the two of them when it becomes my turn. I might not be as mightily muscled as Minsc is, but neither am I a wallflower of a half elf,” Branwen teased, even if Khalid couldn’t hear her across the gorge. It had been a running joke throughout the day that she, a human woman, was much more heavily muscled than Khalid was, despite the fact that Khalid had heavier armor, and was admittedly the better warrior of the two. Indeed, the comparison wasn’t even close, hence why Branwen liked to tease him about his lack of muscles.

“Edwin first,” Imoen intoned firmly turning to the red wizard.

He grumbled, but stowed his staff in his own item space, before stepping to the edge of the gorge. A moment later he rose into the air, and began to flounder his way forward, finding the experience most disagreeable. “This is utterly graceless and without any redeeming quality whatsoever! Why is my moving my arms not having an impact on where I’m going or how fast? Yes, this is most definitely the last time I will allow you to use this spell on my mighty person.”

“‘Mighty person’,” Branwen repeated, sneering and nudging her shoulder against Imoen, an interesting feat given the difference in their heights. Branwen was as tall as Harry, who stood more than a foot taller than Tonks in her new life. “Mighty indeed. He looks like one of those balloons you sometimes see the gnomes make for their children, a particularly ugly one fit only for target practice perhaps.”

Imoen snickered, shaking her head. “Yeah, he doesn’t exactly look all mysterious and all-powerful now does he? Maybe I should keep this spell in reserve for when he lets too much of his ego show.”

“I don’t have nearly enough healing spells to keep you going if you do that,” Branwen demure it, the two women sharing a laugh while Imoen set Edwin on his feet on the other side of the gorge. Luckily for inter-party cooperation, this put him out of hearing range.

Branwen cast another two small healing spells on Imoen, bringing her back up to full health, then looked at her. “Are you going to be able to get yourself across?”

“I... hope so.” Imoen murmured, looking a little worried. “Directing myself while I’m in the air might be a problem though.”

“In that case, it is a good thing I brought rope along,” the blonde haired Viking-like woman said, patting Imoen gently on the shoulder.

As with normal adventurers and their item space, it took her a while to get her rope out, and then everything else back in. But once she was done, Branwen placed a loop of rope around Imoen’s waist, tying it in place before stepping back, holding the other end with both hands, a wry grin on her face. “There, you’re all set. Now, fly me.”

Snorting, Imoen did so, noting that Branwen had been correct. Using the spell that time had taken twelve health, a little higher than both the wizards combined. “Makes sense, I would

wager she at least ways nearly as much as both of them combined anyway. She has got to be the most heavily muscled woman I've ever met. Hell, I bet she could play rugby for the boys back home," Imoen muttered, watching the blonde woman go across the gorge under her control, until she leaned on the other side. "Heh, she'd even be good at it, and not just because the boys would be too busy looking at her baps."

Imoen waited until Branwen had her armor on and was waving at her, with Minsc also helping to take some of the rope, before pointing at herself. "Oh, I hope this works."

Now, Imoen knew that she wasn't exactly built as well as in her Tonks body. Indeed, she was both the shortest, and possibly the lightest member of the party. She didn't have Dynaheir's thighs, or the chest, and both Khalid and Jaheira topped her by a foot.

Despite that however, levitating herself took not only a lot of her health, another whopping twenty-five points, but concentration. She could feel the spell almost trying to get away from her, as if she couldn't quite figure out how to keep it going, pointing at herself and just floating there, her mind stuck in an endless loop of keeping the spell going. It made trying to move herself nearly impossible, and indeed, she couldn't even answer to Dynaheir's shout of "Are you all right?"

After a second with no response, Dynaheir took charge, ordering, "Pull her across. Something seems to have gone wrong but she is in the air at the very least."

"Of course, fair Dynaheir!" Minsc boomed with a laugh. "Although Boo is of the mind that everyone should be able to work weightless as he can, it is truly not a natural thing for us two legs."

With the strongest members in the party pulling her across, Imoen was back over solid ground on their side of the gorge in no time. There, as she felt Branwen touch her shoulder, Imoen finally released the spell, collapsing onto her side even as the cleric hurriedly began to cast a healing spell.

"Why the hell, why was that so hard!?"

"Self-transfiguration is one of the most advanced stages of magic, as is teleportation, even such relatively straightforward spells such as dimension Door. While you were not trying to transfigure yourself, you were trying to shift your body in space and time, so perhaps some of the same rules may apply? Fascinating. Especially since you said you have used a low-level healing spell on yourself?" Edwin inquired, a scroll in hand along with a magical pen.

"I wouldn't call Episkey a healing spell. It closes small wounds, it doesn't give you back your health or speed up the healing process," Imoen answered, touching her head groggily. "But yeah, I think the same rules kind of apply. I had a hell of a lot of trouble keeping the image of myself floating in my head, so much so I couldn't even think of moving once I was in the air. And are you actually taking actual god-damned notes?! Fuck you, you smarmy cock!"

“Ah, as Imoen is obviously feeling better, perhaps we should move on?” Edwin drawled, putting away his writing utensils.

Without a word, Khalid moved off, with Minsc hurrying after him at Dynaheir’s nod even as Branwen helped Imoen to her feet. “While Edwin’s overall attitude leaves much to be desired, he is correct perhaps in his supposition that using such spells on yourself is often harder than you might think. But practice can also help in that area,” Dynaheir said to the younger woman.

“I hope so,” Imoen answered, thinking Branwen for help, even as she pulled out her armor and her weapons again, sliding her short bow over her shoulders. *And it makes me happy that we’ve already seen my metamorphic ability listed, I just access it yet. It was an actual spell, one I’d have to concentrate on every time I used it, that would be just me off so much! Almost as much as the whole small health pool thing. Seriously original Imoen. If I ever meet your spirit, I’m going to smack you upside the head so hard! What the heck did you do, just training your dexterity without any endurance?*

The group continued on, and soon the terrain around them began to change. It went from scrub and flatland to hilly, with numerous small trees and bushes scattered around despite the naturally rocky ground. The hills and the amount of trees and other things began to obscure their line of sight, and Minsc and a very reluctant Khalid fell back to the rest of the group, no longer ranging ahead of them too far so they could keep one another in sight.

Without Harry’s ability to map, the ability to scout ahead was sharply curtailed. At least in Imoen’s and the others opinion. *Have we gotten spoiled? Nah! Imoen thought. It’s not getting spoiled, it’s being pampered. There’s a difference... somewhere.*

OOOOOOO

Much like Imoen, Harry was greeted the morning after meeting Viconia with a message on how he slept but thankfully, he and Viconia had made the campsite livable enough that they got a full night sleep, and spells would have been also memorized. *Not that I have to personally worry about that. Magic is strange here in comparison to back in my original world, Harry reflected, before pausing, wondering when he had started to call his original world that instead of ‘home’. Released a snort as he realized that, for all the strangeness of this world, the Advanced Adventuring System, the whole background his new life being that of a son of Bhaal, and going adventuring and so forth, he really did prefer it to his old one. It’s probably really childish, and a throwback to my original body but hey, no Dursleys!*

“Please do not tell me that you are one of those annoying people who is always cheerful in the morning? I am still getting used to the fact that there is a sun in the sky to indicate day and night, and mornings are most definitely not my time of day,” Viconia grumbled from nearby.



Snorting, Harry turned to address her only to blush a bit. The drow had kicked off some of her blanket in the night, and had apparently decided to sleep without pants on. Currently he was able to see an indecent amount of blue thigh, incredibly toned blue thigh, Harry noticed. Desperately concentrating on her face, Harry was grateful to note that she had been wiping at her eyes as he had gawked. "Er, sorry, um, my cheerfulness in the morning is due to one of my abilities, one of the ones I'll be sharing with you later. It allows me to go from sleep to full wakefulness."

Also sleep off a hangover, but mindful of Imoen's concerns on this score, Harry did not mention that most powerful of abilities.

Viconia pulled her hands away from her face, staring at Harry, then shrugging although to Harry's eyes, perhaps aided by his identify skill, she looked a little nervous on top of her interest. "I see. Then I look forward to learning more."

Trying to change the subject, and not look at the thigh Viconia had yet to tuck away, Harry looked over to Jaheira, getting to his feet and moving over. Jaheira had moved in the night, which was probably a good thing given her current situation. "If you've memorized your spells, would you mind healing Jaheira now?"

Viconia agreed, her mental spell slots full once more. After a moment putting her leggings on, she moved over to join Harry where he knelt down beside the blonde half-elven woman. Examining her, Viconia reflected that she was quite a beauty. Jaheira was a bit more built in the shoulders, and hips perhaps than most surface elves, much like that of Viconia, although she did not quite match up to Viconia's chest. Despite that, the little scars on her chin did not ruin her face, rather, they added individualism and strength.

Of course, those observations were on the surface. Internally, Viconia was wondering how the half elf would react to her presence. Elves and dark elves had a complicated and extremely bloody history, going as far back as her own people had existed and even before that thanks to Lolth and her machinations. *I suppose if she doesn't attack me instantly, I can count that as a win. I rather doubt Harry would be pleased if I am forced to slay his companion in self-defense.*

Setting those thoughts aside, Viconia cradled Jaheira's head, concentrating on her magic as she cast a spell directly into Jaheira's skull.

Leaning away from the woman, Viconia frowned slightly shaking her head. "Brain trauma is always difficult to quantify unless you are a specialist. I believe that my spell will have healed any physical damage, but she will still stay asleep for some time as her mind pieces itself back into shape. I confess that I have not had much experience with brain trauma myself, but I read as much as I could in the texts about it and other problems. She will need more care, and more delicious food."

Viconia did not mention what kind of texts she had read. Learning that the books had been written by a torturer explaining how far you could push a human's brain before it cracked under torture was probably not helpful information. Nor did she like to admit to any kind of lack of experience. That kind of thing could be seen as a weakness all too easily.

Not noticing Viconia's discomfort Harry smirked at the delicious food remark, turning away and heading towards the fire pit. "I suppose that means you would like to be fed too?"

"I would say that is my payment for healing your companion and continuing to help you and her," Viconia shot back, although she softened her stance by asking if there was anything she could do to help.

For a moment, the two of them were silent, sitting on either side of the fire pit as they worked on breakfast, with Viconia doing some of the grinding and chopping for Harry. When they spoke, it was about what they would be doing going forward. Now that Viconia had already used one spell to heal Jaheira's brain, Harry suggested she heal the two of them back up to full health which for Viconia wouldn't take much, but Harry still was dealing with quite a few wounds. Despite her help from the evening before his back was in a good deal of pain, and his foot and ribs were both still broken.

Still, she had known that was coming thanks to their conversations the day before and had changed her spells to match, leaving her with only two offensive spells for the day. She warned Harry of this, saying, "Once I heal you, you may be in the position to be our most able defender, a situation I quite dislike. I will put up with it today, but not for long. I prefer to cover both healing and offense myself. And I am only agreeing to do so now because of our agreement to exchange a vow and your help with my pursuers."

Still, the food was excellent, and Viconia mellowed as the meal went on, deciding that it was most definitely another checkmark next to the idea of continuing to travel with Harry. She watched as Harry fed Jaheira the extremely heavy, thick wolf meat soup – as opposed to the stew from last night, this one had the wolf meat chopped finely - that he had made for breakfast, munching idly on a kind of savory wolf meat stick that he had also made for them. They would be a staple for them once they started moving forward. "By the way, you explained you and this woman were fighting underground, but not why you were there or who you were fighting. I know it had something to do with the enemy who hunted you and your male role model, but no more."

Snorting, Harry nodded. "Were you in Baldur's Gate Long enough to... ah, sorry, you said you hadn't reached it yet. Did the caravan merchants mention the iron shortage?"

"Yes, they did," Viconia nodded, frowning thoughtfully. "I believe they said something about the iron being tainted, or weak?"

"Exactly. Most of the iron along the Sword Coast comes from the mines in Nashkel. For reasons that would take a long discussion on the odd economy of the area to explain. Anyway,

the shortage seems to be part of a..." From there Harry explained the clues they had found about the Iron Intake Issue, the number of bandit groups, and everything that had led Jaheira, Harry and their companions to Nashkel and its mines.

Hearing the mines had shifted into a dungeon appalled Viconia, who shivered. "There are numerous places like that in the Underdark, and none of them are pleasant. The fact you all survived is a testament to your strengths and abilities."

**You have won 50 interest points from Viconia.**

**Remember: Viconia appreciates intelligence, power, and physical ability.**

"Yeah, well, there were a lot of close calls. And if not for Imoen's ability to find traps and her and my... skills..." Harry gave Viconia a look, indicating those skills were some of the secrets he had yet to share, to which Viconia let out a unladylike snort and Harry went on. "We wouldn't have made it through."

Viconia plied Harry with further questions about the mine, the quests they had been given, and what it had been like. This took the rest of the meal, and afterward, Harry left Viconia to clean up. She did so without protest, wishing to do her part and not become lazy, watching Harry all the while as he left the camp. He had removed the bodies last evening after Viconia had fallen insensate, dumping them away from the camp.

He hadn't gone far, thanks to how bad his back and side had been acting up, but he'd been able to move the bodies using his item space, unlike with Jaheira or Dynaheir before her. Still, he hadn't wanted to keep the bodies around, less they attract animals into the camp.

But he hadn't bothered searching their bodies at the time. That had just been one thing too much given the pain he was in at the time. His thinking then was, *it's either search the bodies or conserve my energy enough to make food. Gee, tough choice.*

Now, however, he had a few specific things he wanted. One was to grab up another spare shield and hammer, just in case. The other was to strip them of any valuables and their undershirts. More cloth was always handy. And most importantly Harry rifled through Atrius's corpse to find the hidden pocket that was molded into the interior of his plate mail. A moment later he had it opened and within, Harry found a series of papers and documents, outlining some kind of money trail? Or something, anyway. There were a list of what looked like dates a street name maybe? And a tally of money that wound down several different documents.

It certainly looked interesting and given how Atrius had hidden them they must have been important, or perhaps incriminating given Atrius' label as a 'corrupt' flaming fist officer. But Harry didn't have enough local information to make head or tails out of the names and the money was just a list of money with plus and minuses next to it. The only hint was a line that said 'send message to C and Bs' but again, there wasn't enough there to tell who was being talked about or the message.

So Harry wasn't surprised to not see a new popup saying he had discovered something important to one of his main quests. *Damn. I wonder if Jaheira and Khalid would be able to figure this out?*

With a sigh, Harry stowed the bundle of papers into his item space before returning to camp. There, Viconia peremptorily held out her hand. "Bandages."

"Cloths," Harry retorted, getting a wry snort from the woman even as she took the clothing from him and began to tear it into strips. Item spaces killed all germs so they would be safe, if not clean, which she took care of by placing them in hot water. Unfortunately, Harry didn't have any soap on him, something he made a note to rectify when they reached a town.

Between the two of them, they replaced the various makeshift bandages that Harry had used on Jaheira. This would let Viconia husband a few of her healing spells just in case. When that was done though, Viconia turned to Harry. "And now for your wounds, and then your oath to me."

A part of Harry wanted to think of some way out of performing a magical oath to keep Viconia's secrets. But considering the one she made to him yesterday was built on doing so, he had no choice if she wanted to stay with him. Harry had enough of keeping secrets from his travelling companions.

Harry had once more aggravated his side and spine a bit, but Viconia's massage from the night before had helped somewhat, along with the Cure Medium Wounds she had used on him before the battle. Another medium healing spell finished the work on healing his spine and knitted his ribs together. A second such spell finished the work on them, followed by a Cure minor wounds which healed his foot.

As Viconia worked, Harry watched messages appear in front of his eyes marking out her work. The last one read:

**Congratulations, you are no longer Crippled (x2). Thanks to Viconia's numerous spells, your equally numerous wounds have been cured.**

**Your health is now, 100/140. You received a bump to your health due to the I've Got the willpower' perk.**

*God it is so nice to not been in pain anymore!* Harry thought, nearly slumping in relief. He wasn't at one hundred percent, but forty missing health points was nothing when previously that would have been the majority of his life force. He still felt a few aches and pains, accumulated small bruises and injuries, and his back was still stiff, since Viconia had to direct her magic to heal the most serious wounds first, but that was still way better than it had been. "Thank you..." he whispered out.

Viconia chuckled, oddly touched Harry's heartfelt words, yet also somewhat put off by the amount of weakness Harry was showing. *Then again, given his numerous wounds and the*

*fact he was able to fight so well yesterday even crippled three times over, perhaps it is not weakness, so much as an acknowledgement of debt? Regardless, I know what he must do to make it up to me.*

With that in mind, Viconia stood up from where she had crouched beside Harry, her hands around his lower leg. “There. I believe you are certainly in good enough shape to give me your oath as you demanded I do last evening on the name of Shar.”

Nodding Harry took a moment to stretch, before gesturing Viconia to stand in front of him, holding out his arm. “Are you ready? I will warn you if you haven’t been an active part of one before, Magical Oaths are not like swearing on the name of a god except they are both serious business.”

Viconia was not one to doubt herself. She had made the decision the evening before to go through with this and wasn’t about to back down now. “I am,” she announced firmly.

Nodding back, Harry closed his eyes for a second, murmuring, “Ergo Fides.” As he spoke those words, Harry felt the magic rousing within him, pumping through his body almost as if it really was a part of his very blood, a light thrumming sensation just beneath the skin. *Is this what magic feels like to sorcerers here? Or is it just me and Imoen, as our magic is part of us?*

Setting that thought aside, he clasped Viconia’s arm, forearm to forearm. As they touched, Harry’s magic began to sprout from his arm in the form of long thin tendrils of glowing white colored magic reached out to Viconia. She watched him anxiously, one hand ready to grab her hammer, the other ready to be wrenched away should Harry try anything funny.

But Harry didn’t try anything funny. That wasn’t the kind of person he was. Instead, he voiced his Oath to Viconia, as she had him. “I, Harry Potter, vow to keep Viconia’s secrets until death so long as she keeps my own, to never betray her trust, or turn against her unless her own actions warrant it. Ergo Fides.”

“I, Viconia DeVir, do witness this Oath,” Viconia declared, trying hard not to show her relief. *Praise Shar, he went through it. I, I will at least have one person here on the surface I can trust to watch my back and keep my secrets.*

Indeed, Viconia did not know the half of it. Given the dual nature of their oaths, something interesting occurred. Just like with Harry taking Edwin’s Oath, the message that appeared as his magic faded away was in gold with a orange background. But what Harry didn’t expect was the words it said, which he read even as he fell to one knee, gasping in air at the cost of the oath.

**You have taken part in a Blood Ritual, a magically infused Oath!**

**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. Seriously, stop doing this kind of**

thing! You just got all those health points back, and now you're back to half your current score.

**Be Warned!** Once more, if she becomes aware of it, Shar can easily cancel Viconia's side of these shared oaths. On your side, should you break it, the consequences will be severe, as it will if Viconia breaks it of her own will. Shar is not a forgiving deity.

**If Shar does order Viconia to break her oath, you will be able to tell if this occurs... possibly before Shar orders her to try and kill you. Maybe.**

This message was followed by another, even longer one.

**Performing this Ritual was a direct result of Viconia's similar vow to you. Given the nature of these vows, the regular respect/interest or trust points necessary to become a party member have been waived. After all, your trust is now going to be enforced by your very life and that of her deity.**

**Viconia has become a Limited Party Member. A limited companion will be part of your party and will gain access to several aspects of being a party member. Gain further points in respect and interest to let Viconia have access to the full gamut of your parties abilities.**

**Viconia, as a Level 1 Limited Party Member will have access to the shared, controlled Item Space. She will be able to make the most out of formations, unlike travelling companions.**

**Viconia will not be able to share or gain skills. She will not be able to see her stats, although you can. You will not gain the ability to manage any new stat points earned through level ups until Viconia is a level Level Three Full Party member.**

Shaking his head at how they had just stumbled into this kind of thing, Harry had to think for a second through the haze of renewed pain before he realized the most important reason behind this new circumstance when it came to the AAS. *The dual oaths. Edwin, Branwen and Dynaheir made vows to us, but not vice versa. But because I promised to do it, and because the oaths are so reciprocal, it makes some sense, I guess, whereas with Edwin, there wasn't anything like that since we had him backed into a corner.*

As the second gold and orange colored message disappeared, it was replaced by a third, one which Harry had seen three times before.

**Viconia has become eligible to become a Limited Party Member. Would you like to add Viconia to your party?**

That same message, only reversed, had appeared in front of Viconia, who blinked at it in surprise before looking over at Harry, her eyes narrowed. "I take it that this 'party' thing is part

of your secret? I have seen similar messages before, although most of those caused by the actions of others were negative in nature.”

Hearing the slightly accusing tone in Viconia’s words, Harry very deliberately sat down on the ground. He crossed his legs, his hands on his knees so as to appear as nonthreatening as possible. He did this so obviously that Viconia snorted in amusement, and Harry won another ten points of interest from her, along with a statement that she enjoyed a sense of drama and humor like any woman.

“What you just saw is indeed part of one of my skills. In fact it is part of one of my base skills the one from which a lot of other abilities spring: the Advanced Adventuring System. Essentially, it takes all of the normal adventuring abilities, takes a lot of them to the next level and gives me direct control over the majority. You mentioned my having control of my item space. Now that the AAS skill will be treating you as if you were a party member, you will be able to do the same. Try it out.”

“It is not as if I have much in my item space to begin with,” Viconia muttered, putting her hammer into her item space, and then imagining herself taking out the shield Harry had given her before the battle last night. Instantly it was in her possession, and not just in her hand, but on her arm, causing her to stiffen in surprise. She put it back in, and then played with the item space for a time, calling on different items in a random fashion to test what was going on. It worked, every time.

Finally, she stopped, bouncing the Gourd of Power Harry had given her the night before in one hand for a time as she looked at him thoughtfully. “All right, so your skill has changed something about my ability to use my Item Space. While in this case it’s changing my own skills is beneficial, in the long term its ability to do so is... disturbing.”

*If not for the oath he took leading directly to that change, Viconia mused, I would be much angrier about this right now. But as his oath to keep my secrets as I do his let this occur, I cannot truly distrust it as much as I possibly should. That and... the power he used. This AAS skill is just the base of it. How much more is there to discover, and how can it all help me grow stronger in turn?*

There was no disdain for Harry in that thought even as Viconia mused about using him. It was simply a fact of life to Viconia: that one should use everything and everyone you could to get stronger. “Explain to me more about this AAS skill,” Viconia practically ordered.

Although Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly at her tone, he agreed, explaining what they had discovered about the AAS up to this point, although he left out certain things, such as the fact that the skill called itself the Gamer System initially, the effect it had on his mental acuity – the Gamer’s Mind - and of course, his own origins. He went over the map in detail, explaining that she now appeared on it as a green dot, the same as himself and Jaheira. He explained about the sharing thing, and how he had learned Cleave through that along with Backstab.

Viconia became annoyed at the fact she was but a Limited Party Member, but understood why. Their oaths gave an excellent basis for trust, enforcing it in fact. But closeness, friendliness? The fact that it didn't enforce that kind of thing actually made her feel slightly better. But the bit that most interested her was the fact Harry could see her stats. Her eyes gleamed with nearly fanatical light as she leaned forward, giving Harry a view down her shirt very deliberately. She had taken off her armor as part of her experiments with her Item Space, and had seen no need to put it back on. "Can you share my stats with me? The idea of seeing your own stats, of being able to set your own stat points, that is an amazing concept."

Nodding, Harry held up a hand, pointing above Viconia's head and saying, "Status Screen."

A moment later, the green colored status screen of a party member appeared in front of Harry. Harry hadn't really noticed the color before, but figured it made sense, matching the party members' dots on the map.

**Name:** Viconia DeVir

**Gender:** Female (DUH)

**Health:** 70/80

**Race:** Drow

**Class:** Level 7 Cleric

**Strength:** 6

**Willpower:** 12 (+5)

**Dexterity:** 19

**Constitution:** 10

**Durability:** 4

**Wisdom:** 15

**Charisma:** 14

**Intelligence:** 14

**Luck:** 5

Harry very carefully did not mention the gender at all, figuring that was redundant, although he had to bite back a snicker at the 'duh', always amused by the snark of the AAS. *Yes, AAS, I've already noticed more than once that yes, Viconia is female and beautiful. And may I just say thanks again for the whole Gamer's Mind thing? It might be designed for combat, but it really helps a lot in these situations.* While Harry was no longer a virgin and had spent



several months going through the same series of dates/romantic interactions, women were still more of a mystery to him than he liked. *But hey, at least I don't act like Garrick. Heh.*

For her part, Viconia did not notice the slight smirk from Harry, or the fact she was still giving him a view down her shirt. If she had, she would have just been amused by it. Looking was free, and if Harry was swayed by his interests in such things it could give her a means to influence him. But instead of thinking about that, Viconia was shocked. No, she was appalled. “By Shar, I knew I was weak, but that weak? Strength of Six? SIX!? And a Constitution of ten, and durability for four?! UGH, this, this weakness is an affront!”

Harry chuckled dryly. “If it’s any consolation, my durability is only fourteen. I er... had negative durability for a bit there when I was Crippled, but once you healed me the once, it went away, thankfully. I’d kind of been worried a single hit would make me implode like a grape. I think we squishy folk can’t really get a lot out of durability until it’s in the twenties? I’m guessing there. But we don’t have scales or any other kind of natural armor.”

“I can understand that, but my Constitution annoys me, especially after my flight from Atrius and his ilk,” Viconia grumbled, before looking down at her arms in equal displeasure. “And I refuse to be weak. As soon as I am able I will attempt to gain greater physical strength. I might have pushed the stats that would help my cleric skills, but even so...”

Her teeth began to grind at the very idea there was an area she was so weak in, and Harry interjected, “Well, I do know some exercises that can build strength. And if you become a full party member, then I will be able to assign any stat points you earn from leveling up. It will be slow, but if you gain two stats points like Half-elves do with one extra assigned to wisdom or dexterity, it can still build up over time.”

At that, Viconia smiled at him, a real, beaming, entirely unforced, non-crooked smile for the first time. “That will be tremendous, thank you, Harry.”

“Guh...” Harry grunted, shifting in place to try and cover the noise, flushing slightly as another message appeared overlaying the pre-existing status screen.

**Willpower Check Passed. You have a strong will and have thrown off Viconia's accidental attempt to Charm you. You're not charmed at all... right?**

Snorting internally at the message, Harry looked back at Viconia, finding her leaning back now against a fallen log, no longer giving him such a good view down her shirt. Trying to convince himself this was a good thing, Harry asked if she wanted to hear the second sheet of her Stat sheet.

When she answered in the affirmative, Harry read it aloud. This was the page that had racial abilities, like skills and other abilities which impacted stats, along with the weapon skills. “You have a skill point in war hammer, sword and shield, mace and sling. Beyond that, I’ll just read it out verbatim.”

### Racial Skills:

**Drow:** As a drow, Viconia will live as long as an elf would without seemingly aging. Don't ask about her age. She is able to see in the dark even better than most elves, and has 50% magical resistance regardless of magical type.

### Life Skills:

**Survivor, level 3:** Due to her life thus far, Viconia has become a survivor. She is able to push her Constitution far more than her mere numbers suggest, overriding her Constitution with her Willpower, adding a +5 in distress. Viconia is also able to ignore hunger or other debuffs for short amounts of time. However, if she crashes while still under the influence of the Survivor Status Buff, Viconia will be afflicted by a commensurate hit to her health.

**Willful level 5:** Rather than being a snide way to say someone is headstrong, this skill is a sign of the harsh tests that Viconia has faced and defeated. She is nearly immune to Charm or other mental attacks and has a strong urge to go her own way, never letting society choose what is right or wrong, let alone control Viconia's actions. She is also somewhat tone deaf, however. Do not ask her for an opinion on emotional issues or anything about local society, and not just because she's liable to be ignorant about them. +5 to Willpower.

**Cook level 2:** Having been out on her own for several months, Viconia has added to her already semi-competent repertoire of cooking skills. She can cook over an open fire, deduce what tastes good, and can tell when she has done something wrong by tasting it, and can make a somewhat decent meal.

**Poacher, level 2:** Viconia has learned how to create simple traps for small animals. They don't always work, but they can be effective up to anything the size of a fox.

"Hmmpf, that is more like it," Viconia murmured, further appeased by the Survivor effect, while Harry was trying hard not to stutter at the whole fifty percent magical resistance thing. For several minutes the discussion devolved into one devoted to stats, what they both knew about how to raise them or gain them, then it segued into one about quests, the other things that the AAS let Harry control, and then back to the whole party concept, and the fact Harry could see Viconia's response to his actions as a series of numbers in terms of interest and respect.

Throughout this discussion Viconia's attitude had mellowed and beyond looking positively jealous about his Identification and observations skills she seemed to have taken everything in stride. To Harry's surprise, this included the whole the relationship points now that it had come up in the conversation.

When Harry brought that up, Viconia shrugged. "The fact that you are so open about it makes me trust your words more than I would if you attempted to obfuscate the truth. I also believe firmly that while your system will be able to tell what I think of your actions or words, it

cannot change my own opinion or the thoughts of them. The fact that you can see these relationship points thus becomes a intriguing, rather than something to be concerned over.” She then glared at Harry, somewhat ruining her philosophical air. “But if I detect any such thing, or sense that you are trying to act in a manner that I would be pleased by just to get those points, I will probably leave the party that at that very moment.”

She waited until Harry nodded at that before going on. “I am also wondering how you gained such a skill.”

Grimacing, Harry raised a hand acknowledging what she said, before quickly moving on, crossing his arms as he turned the conversation back on Viconia lest it become too one-sided. “You will have to continue wondering for a little bit. Now that I have shared some of my secret with you, it’s your turn. This is not a one way street., Viconia.”

Viconia glared at him, and at first, Harry was afraid she wouldn’t share any of his secrets. *How would the magical oath react to that?* He thought worried. The wording kind of hinted they both had to share secrets, and if they didn’t he wasn’t certain what would happen.

But eventually, Viconia’s glare shifted toward the fire, which still burned nearby from breakfast. As she stared into it, Viconia began to speak. “Drow culture is very much driven by three main concepts. Women are more worthy than men. Power makes right, and something everyone should strive for. And Lolth and her priesthood are the center of our world and should be obeyed, revered, and feared at all costs.”

The loathing in Viconia’s words were unmistakable, and she shook her head. “I, I see no problem is striving for power, that is a tenant of all life, to become stronger to affect those around you and defend yourself. But in drow society, all drow submit to the priestesses of Lolth and thus give them power over you. I, I was a faithful priestess of Lolth for decades, and did many things I thought questionable, but all served a greater purpose, or so I thought.”

She waited for Harry to jump to conclusions, to denounce her or to sneer at her thoughts on power, but he didn’t. He was, however, reminded of the sorting hat’s song. *Viconia would have made a perfect Slytherin, just like Edwin. But not all Slytherin were evil. Nott was okay, and so was that foreigner, Zabini, and the hat wanted to put me in Slytherin too. So just like I can take Edwin as I find him, I can accept Viconia’s past... I hope.*

Seeing that Harry wasn’t going to interrupt her, Viconia went on. “At one point... three years ago perhaps? I do not know how long it took, me to escape the Underdark. Regardless of when it occurred, I was tasked to ritually kill an infant in the name of Lolth, to send the soul of a baby born in the slave pens to the Spider Queen. I, I refused. I could not go through with it. It was a moment of weakness, and a rival in the priesthood jumped on, killing the child.” She laughed bitterly. “My moment of compassion saw no return but the fact my house fell out of favor with Lolth.”

She paused again, her bitter laughter returning for a few seconds becoming darker. Sacrificing magical items, gold or servants mattered not at all. I had denied Lolth her due, and she wanted me in turn to prostrate myself before her, to admit my wrong. I refused, and when a lesser house was tempted to assault House DeVir I aided in its destruction. But instead of offering them up as sacrifices, I sent no souls her way, simply slaying them all outright. I would not submit any longer, not to Lolth and her pointless, cruel and capricious ways.”

“Good for you, but I can’t imagine your fellow drow took it well,” Harry murmured, pleased with Viconia’s stance. He had no issues with killing anymore, something he blamed on the whole Quirrellmort incident, the violence in this world and his Gamer’s Mind skill. But sacrificing someone, let alone their soul? No. That was way too bloody far.

“You speak the obvious Abalolth,” Viconia snorted, but continued her story. “My mother decided enough was enough at that point, and decided to sacrifice me to Lolth to appease her anger. She made a full ceremony of it, the Feast of Pain, hoping to save our family by sacrificing my body and soul. But I had a brother named Valas. He and I had always gotten along well, perhaps his friendship was the start of my turning away from the ways of Lolth, when I discovered early on that not only are males not always worthless for aught but seed, but also that working together made you stronger.”

Viconia’s face twisted, part grief and part fond memory perhaps? “Valas was a powerful wizard and when he interrupted the Feast of Pain he killed our mother when she attacked him after freeing me. We won our way out of the ritual chamber, but Lolth had turned one of her eyes to us. Before we left the room, my brother was, was already changing into a drider, a half-man, half-spider monster. I in turn was finally stripped of my clerical powers.”

Harry grimaced, shaking his head. “That, that reminds me uncomfortably of Gorion’s sacrifice. And as for siblings, I have a half-sibling, sort of, named Imoen. I cannot imagine what I would be willing to do to someone if they tried to sacrifice her to any goddess, regardless of pantheon. I’m sorry that your brother was turned into a drider but I think I would have chanced the same thing in his place. Or maybe gone big.”

Cocking her eyebrow, Viconia looked at him quizzically, feeling somewhat drained by sharing her tale as she had. It was not something she would’ve been willing to do otherwise, but Harry had already shared something amazing with her, and their vows demanded a certain reciprocity. “Go big? What you mean by that?”

“I would have disrupted the ceremony in a more circuitous way. Maybe planted some kind of delayed action alchemical concoction to explode underneath your mother and whoever else was in the room, shaped so it left the sacrificial area alone? Or maybe in the building somewhere else, her room, maybe? Make it somehow look as if Lolth was preemptively warning your mother it was bad idea?” Harry shrugged, internally shaking his head. *Maybe the hat was right, I would have made a good Slytherin.* “Something like that. Directly challenging

and killing your mother would not be the totality of my plans. It would have been the most fun, but that's not the same thing."

Viconia surprised herself by laughing at that, shaking her head, sending her silver hair side to side catching Harry's attention despite the fact that she had pulled the hood of her traveler's cloak over her head. This was not because she had to hide her features, but simply because the hood gave Viconia some protection from the sun, which her skin and eyes were nowhere near used to yet. "While such ideas are delightful, my mother was no fool, even if she was a product of our society. The priesthood routinely sweeps the temple for anything that should not be there, my mother had dedicated slaves as taste testers, and our personal ritual room was built far too strongly for anything outside to actually damage it enough to cause such an instability."

"And I didn't even think about poisoning her," Harry chuckled, shaking his head. "Not a bad idea though. "But how did you go from being a priestess of Lolth to a cleric of Shar? Unless she was just waiting, watching for an opportunity nearby?"

"No. It is your turn to share it once more," Viconia announced, staring at Harry, although she was smiling now, not as wide as when Harry offered to help her redistribute her points, but still warmer than before. The hardest portion of sharing her past was over with, and Harry had proven to be an extremely pleasant listener. *Nor did he make the mistake of trying to sympathize with me overmuch. Rather he sympathized with my brother's actions. If he had tried to sympathize with me, or to say that I made the right decision, or any such thing, I would've been most angry, as he would be speaking from ignorance of the true cost of my actions.*

**You have earned +100 interest and +100 Respect points with Viconia.**

**She evidently likes the fact that while you understood her actions, you didn't show any kind of sympathy for her plight.**

Keeping that in mind, Harry nodded back at Viconia, then went into his own tale. How he had recently learned that he was a son of the dead God of Murder, and really didn't want to acknowledge that aspect of his upbringing at all. That he had been brought up in candle keep by Gorion who turned out to be a famous adventurer, and that his fellow foundling, Imoen was one as well. How Imoen had found the secrets of Blood Magic and what it was. And how the man they were after was somehow connected to the Iron Intake Issue.

"In this case, I rather imagine the two will be closely aligned," Viconia murmured thoughtfully. "Yet as a paladin, I suppose you need to be mindful of your motivations, not just your actions. I know that is the case in some ways with my own cleric role, although Shar would no doubt force me to take a very different path than your own eventual patron."

As the conversation went on, Harry wasn't done with shocking Viconia with his responses to her tale just yet. When she covered the rest of her story, how Shar had helped her escape the Underdark by giving her back her cleric skills, and even guiding her to an underwater

entrance to the underworld. Harry was merely interested, not disgusted by some of the things she had needed to do in order to gain access to the underground river through series of enemies, commenting only, "I have had some experience with underground water and rivers. I didn't like them much."

When Viconia came to explain how she had killed the merchant who had tried to force himself on her, again, Harry's response was far more pleasant than the alternative. "If he tried to force himself on you, you're killing him in self-defense is perfectly justified. Mind you, stabbing him through the balls while you held his mouth closed wasn't something I would've done, but considering his attempted crime, it makes perfect sense."

Viconia snorted at that, amused, but pleased that even a paladin would see the rightness of her actions. *Of course, this particular paladin has yet to give his vow to any gods, so perhaps that will change? Still, at least at present he does not seem to have a problem with my actions.*

However, Viconia was far more interested in Harry's powers. And since she had just explained how some of her spells had changed when she's shifted allegiance to Shar, she could now turn the conversation back to them them. Specifically, the Blood Mage skill.

Harry explained once more how it had been Imoen who had figured out that they could use their magics to empower spells despite their classes, how it took from their life's blood with each spell and how she had found out it worked best when directed by words taken from an ancient tome in Candlekeep. That was the best explanation for the occasionally spoken spells Harry and Imoen used.

Viconia was extremely interested in everything about this new, unknown magical school and pleased by the fact that Harry was already keeping it a secret. "Having a secret power like that to fall back on is always a good idea. But I do have questions. Why do you even need magical spells?"

"What do you mean? They allow you to control and mold the magic, much the same as any spell would," Harry protested. "Wizards, druids and clerics all need words and gestures, or just gestures for simpler spells and words for larger ones, the verbal and somatic components. Why does that surprise you?"

"Because most magic users are pulling magic from the world around them, or the Weave directly in the case of sorcerers. Similarly, druids pull the power of nature to them and mold it through the use of spells. They must shape the magic as it comes into their hands. You do not pull the magic from anywhere, if the magic comes from the blood have the magic inside you. That is a far more raw connection to magic than anything I have heard of. And if it is, then surely this simpler the better. Simply use your imagination and willpower, rather than set spells. Do not limit yourself like that." Viconia commanded, remembering along the discussions she'd had on the nature of the various types of magic with her brother.

While somewhat annoyed at her tone, Harry took Viconia's words to heart. Thanks to the necessity of clearing the dungeon, even after getting their oath he and Imoen hadn't had the time to talk about their magic with the two magic users, so it was possible. "Well, if you're willing to heal me as I experiment, then maybe we can see what happens."

Viconia assented to this with a wave of her hand indicating Harry should get on with it in the same abrupt movement. Then she leaned back, crossing her legs and watching as if Harry was about to put on a show for her amusement, but also taking in everything keenly. "Remember it is your imagination that you must train first, create the image, then enforce it on the world." *Show me the power of your divine blood...*

Turning, Harry looked over at a nearby downed tree, one of the ones that marked the edge of their small camp. Raising his hand, Harry pointed his palm at it, but rather than using any of the pre-existing spells that Imoen had taught him, he followed Viconia's suggestions. He created the image of what he wanted in his mind, and then sort of thrust it out, forcing it onto reality. A second later, the tree was pulled out from its roots, and a second after that splinters were sent everywhere but in towards the camp as it exploded.

Harry stumbled, going to his knee, as a message appeared in front of his eyes.

**You have used your blood mage ability.**

**While it is not specific spell, any use of your blood mage abilities must have a commensurate drain on your health. -15 to health.**

"That was a lot harder than using the spells, forcing that image out took it out of me," Harry sweating a bit. "Although the cost wasn't nearly as much in terms of my actual health. Weird."

"That is something you can practice with, however." Viconia said. Somehow as Harry had been concentrating on the image he wanted she had crossed the intervening distance. Now she stood behind him, leaning against Harry's back as she stared at the destruction, her expression avid. Harry blushed at the contact, but she moved away quickly, even as she continued speaking examining the area for the damage the spell had done.

She was particularly interested in the damage the splinters had done to the surrounding area. That had **interesting** possibilities. "If your connection to the murder hobo, and I quite like that term Harry, is true, then it stands to reason that not only will your power have something to do with blood, but it will be raw, and thus able to be shaped by your will."

"It's true that despite being harder to pull off, the spell didn't actually take as much out of me as the two spells closest to what I was doing would have. Although it was more than a few other minor spells, so I doubt they will be going away," Harry mused. "I will have to experiment with this further, but if I can do something like that, with half the cost using a levitate spell and then an explosion spell, that could be huge."

Viconia nodded, although her thoughts had little to do with the actual power Harry had now, so much as what it represented. That Harry really was the son of a God, and what that in turn implied. *He is a power. Young yet, but one that will grow in time. And one that I could perhaps manipulate. At least to the extent that he will be willing to protect me in the future. I just need to point his mind in the proper direction, and he willingly followed my directions here.*

“Any more suggestions?” Harry asked.

“Not at present. Nothing specific anyway. I would suggest that you practice this kind of ability at least twice every day. Perhaps more often once your acquaintance over there is on her feet and able to add her own healing spells to mine. Although I would like to see you use your lay on hands spell as well.”

Viconia watched as Harry used his Lay On Hands spell, noting the differences. Viconia had been concentrating her senses on him all the while and she had seen the magic leaving Harry’s hands when he cast his Blood Mage spell. But before that, there had been no buildup, no glow of condensed magic as there was with the Lay On Hands spell. For all intents and purposes before Harry had used the attack spell, he had seemed a normal Paladin, without any magic of his own.

And when he used the Lay On Hands spell, he was pulling from the Aether all around them, the underlying deific magic of the planet, much like any other paladin would who had yet to swear his Oath to a particular deity. *So he is a dual wielder in some fashion but without the actual classification... or the limitations. Fascinating. But what is the limit of his magic? Is there some way to help him gain more power via his Blood Mage ability beyond the obvious of raising his Constitution stat and thereby his health?*

She reported her findings to Harry musing about the last point aloud before confessing she didn’t have any other idea at present for him to try out. “Perhaps a wizard would be able to help further.”

“What you’ve already done is a major help. Why should I be so limited in my selection of spells? It’s my magic after all. Like a muscle, it’ll do what I tell it to and I just need to be aware how hard I can push,” Harry exulted.

“Exactly! Well thought out,” Viconia answered, just as enthusiastic for her party leader and new defender to get stronger. “I could wish that my connection to Shar gave me such abilities, but I believe it comes from the fact you are a demigod, in a very strict sense of the term, combined with your father’s actual realm of control that makes you able to use the spells.”

Harry was about to mentally refute this almost automatically at the idea of calling Bhaal his father in any way, shape or form, but when he pushed past that, Harry actually thought about it for a few seconds. Maybe that was how he was able to power the spells? After all, being from another dimension only explained where he got the spells themselves, not the



ability to power them. *Maybe she's onto something there? Unless magic is part of our soul... which would mean it comes from me and Imoen, which would be much more palatable, honestly, but probably not something I would say.*

The two of them continued to talk and exchange minor stories throughout the day, as Viconia said that Jaheira wasn't going to be ready to be moved for at least another day, perhaps more. When it came to mental damages, keeping Jaheira's head still was a must. And Harry's decision to make himself healed completely meant that Viconia would need to rest again before using her healing spells.

When Harry suggested that he could use his own magic to heal Jaheira, Viconia warned against it, her tone tart. "Perhaps if her wounds were entirely physical, you could try. But at the moment, even healing her physical wounds would take a commensurate amount of health from you which is the last thing we want. And unless you are able to visualize her mental functions such a fashion that you can then push your idea of her repaired mind onto reality, I don't see such an attempt working."

"Couldn't I simply imagine the concept of wellness, or something like that?" Harry muttered, scratching at his lightning bolt scar. "You would think so."

"I do not think it works that way. Again, how someone else thinks is not something you can visualize," Viconia snorted, gesturing back to the area where the tree had exploded. "You can visualize changes to the physical world like that to it great degree, but imagining how a body is supposed to work and imposing that on reality, let alone doing the same to a mind is different."

Harry tsked at that but dropped the subject. Viconia was right after all. "How many minor healing spells do you have left? If I can't heal Jaheira, I'd like to experiment a bit."

"Rather than me using them to heal the rest of her injuries? I'm not arguing against it, simply commenting that it does not seem to fit your personality, oh mighty paladin," Viconia drawled, making Harry wince. He had indeed forgotten about Jaheira's other injuries, concentrating wholly on her head injury and the possible brain trauma now that Viconia had replaced the original bandages he had used to help the various wounds. But she did have other injuries, not just the large amount of scrapped skin, but her broken back, which would have made her a quadriplegic without magic to heal her.

With a sigh, he stood up, and headed out of the camp. "I'm going to see if I can make a fishing rod, and get us some fish for lunch and dinner. If you could use a few of the spells on her that would be great but keep two in reserve?"

Viconia snorted, and then turned to Jaheira, using two of her remaining four Cure Minor Wound spells on her, before deciding that unlike Harry, she had no desire to do anything much today but rest and recover. She laid out near the half Elven woman, staring up at the sky in something like bemused wonder and chagrin. "When am I ever going to get used to views like

this?" she snorted again before pulling her hood further down to cover her eyes and leaned back, closing her eyes.

Harry was back several hours later, and found Viconia sleeping, one arm over her eyes as she slept on her back. His return to the camp had her up on her knees, her hammer and shield in hand as Viconia glared around herself for any kind of danger. Seeing Harry there, she subsided somewhat, although her eye twitched at the five fish that he had caught. "Impressive, for a male I suppose."

"And actually fruitful too. I hadn't seen a stat change in a while. A skill yeah, that Constitution skill I learned that I told you about. But something that will change my stats had become unusual. But this worked. It gave me plus one to my Dexterity."

Viconia grunted at that. It wasn't uncommon for adventurers of all sorts to run into things that helped their stats along in small ways like that, but actually seeing such notifications and knowing the stats were being added was just incredible. As was the fact that Harry had already informed her that half elves at the very least had their stat points from leveling up distributed in such a tilted manner towards that same stat. Viconia didn't personally like that at all, she would much prefer to have been able to spread out her stats, covering all her bases and having no set weaknesses.

*But in comparison to the rest that the Advanced Adventuring System allows him, that is...* "Wait, why are you carrying the fish on the pole? Foolish male, did you forget your own abilities with item space?"

"No," Harry answered halfheartedly, shaking his head and not meeting Viconia's eyes. She snorted, which Harry was rapidly coming to understand was part of her nonverbal communication abilities and he glared at her. "So was that a no on fish?"

"I am not so hungry at the present moment, although I would undoubtedly eat anything you came up with," Viconia answered acknowledging that Harry was a far better cook than she was, something she was somewhat amused by. "I will admit I have not tried human seafood though. In the Underdark, there are numerous fish for the darkness. But most of them are poisoned, and there are several that are so poisoned the whole point to capture them is the poison rather than the meat."

"Well you're about to see another little aspect of the Advanced Adventuring System." With that, Harry laid out the fish, then touched it scales with two fingers. A second later, the scales were deposited in a pile to one side, and the fillets of fish had been taken out so well that it almost looked as if the smaller bones had simply been magically removed from existence.

Viconia stared, then stood up quickly. "My Poacher skill allows me to make small snares and other traps as well. If you can do that, there is no need to limit ourselves to simply fish, foolish one! I will be back!"

Harry was still laughing as she stomped out of sight, still growling implications at his intelligence.

OOOOOOO

Despite the fact that they were still a few hundred yards ahead of the others, when they ran into trouble the advanced warning of Khalid and Minsc pausing and coming back towards them hardly mattered, because a second later, the people they had been retreating from came into view. It was a band of hobgoblins, a semi-human species Imoen hadn't encountered before. The band was ten strong, with one of them wearing heavy armor, full plate mail like Khalid, only where his looked streamlined and a mix between the armor of an elf and human, the hobgoblin's looked like something from a fantasy villain's wardrobe, with heavy pauldrons, spikes coming from his shoulders, and large horns on his helmet.

The band of orcs spread out as the team came together, although they didn't immediately attack. Instead, they just spread out, and their leader held up a hand staring at the group as Khalid and Minsc fell back to meet the others, standing as a unit.

"Well, it appears as if getting lost at least paid off and a little bit. It looks as if you're off the hook for now. Glartheb," the hobgoblin in the heavy armor at the center of the group growled, making one of the other hobgoblins breath a sigh of relief, slumping in place. Ignoring his minion, the hobgoblin turned to glare at Imoen and her group, who had spread out to face the newcomers, with Edwin and Dynaheir ready to drop behind some limited cover, a series of rocks built up almost like cairns nearby. "Surrender. We want your armor, your iron, your gold... and whatever else catches our fancy. We're the Chill, and I'm its... raggh... second-in-command...Ardenor Crush... graah, second, second-in command... that, that blackguard bastard..."

Saying his rank like that seemed to infuriate the hobgoblin and watching him snarl under his breath caused Imoen to really, really wish that she had Harry's Observation ability when it came to people. *Oh, I can read guys well enough, but hobgoblin faces are just different enough to throw me off, and body language is too damn tricky.*

*Although I can see that orange glow around him, which isn't giving me a warm and fuzzy feeling.* The only time Imoen had seen something like that was the dungeon bosses the band had dealt with. *And isn't the Chill a mercenary band or something? I think I remember hearing about them at the Friendly Arm Inn.*

"Er, I don't suppose there's room to negotiate, is there?" Imoen began only to pause as Khalid and Minsc let fly with their arrows at the same time two of the hobgoblins did. "Guess not!" Imoen yelled as she ducked to one side, rolling on the ground as one of the arrows went through where she had been standing.

Ardenor blocked the arrows negligently with his shield in the same automatic manner that Imoen had seen Harry and Khalid show, making it easy to see he had some knowledge of

Sword and Shield style. The red-skinned hobgoblin bellowed something in a language Imoen had never heard. *Damn but if that didn't sound like the Black Tongue of Mordor,*

But that was the last internal joke Imoen had attention to give as at Ardenor's command, the enemy archers raised their bows. Ardenor and two others did not, moving forward as their fellows spread out.

"Dynaheir, Khalid, try to deal with the..." That was as far as Imoen got before both the wizards were already doing their own thing, Khalid switching out his longbow with a sword and shield of his own and moved to meet their charge. Minsc moved to follow, his own longbow replaced by his claymore, his favored weapon in close combat. There was a second's delay, then Branwen charged towards two of the archers, howling a warcry.

As she did, Imoen's vision was overlaid by a announcement box, telling her that her charisma check had failed and that the rest of her traveling companions would not follow her orders in battle just as Imoen had to duck to the side again as an arrow passed her by inches. "Tell me something I don't know!"

Branwen crashed bodily into one of the archers who hadn't retreated fast enough, sending him stumbling onto his ass. With him down, Branwen howled out "For the Glory of Tempus!" and then cast some kind of spell towards the one who had retreated. Once again Imoen found herself wishing for Harry's ability to identify things, but surprisingly, it worked in this instance. *Perhaps because it was an ability Branwen's using instead of an individual?*

**Branwen has used Call Lightning.**

**This is a priestly spell that calls down lightning. A spell that grows stronger with the user, the number of lightning bolts created going up by one for every four total levels. The bolt of lightning flashes down from the sky at the priest's target. After that, the bolt will spread to other nearby enemies in a far weaker style.**

**This spell must be cast outside, or else it will not work.**

The lightning bolt struck the hobgoblin, slaying him instantly and then creating little arcs of lightning that spread through the enemy ranks, causing injury and making several of the archers to pause, shaking their heads or grimacing in pain. Then Branwen turned her attention to the downed hobgoblin at her feet, crushing his skull with a single blow.

But by that point, the other six archers had spread out so that even a Fireball spell couldn't hit more than one. Edwin did try anyway, killing one archer outright and causing two to stagger. But they stayed on their feet, firing back, and Edwin gasped as one of the arrows took him in the knee. Another hit his chest. His robe saved him from dying, but it was obvious that he was in pain, and he intoned another spell, one Imoen had not seen in a while. A dome of Protection from Normal Weapons appeared around Edwin as he glared at the hobgoblins

who had struck him, standing up painfully as he began to twine his fingers together. "You will learn to not anger the mighty Edwin Odesseiron you subhuman rat!"

At that point, Imoen had dodge around several other arrows coming from different directions, and it was with a start that she realized more archers had appeared from behind the first group, allowing the rest of them to spread out still further to fully circle the adventuring group. "CRAP!" *Is this the kind of thing Harry had to keep his attention on? Damn it, I am going to make him try and figure out a way to share his map skill with the rest of us the minute we can!*

Dynaheir too was having trouble with the majority of the archers, who seemed to know the first rule of combat in this world: gank the mages first. The dusky-skinned Witch had ducked behind a boulder and, lacking Edwin's Protection From Normal Weapons spell, was now using her sling instead of her spells, ducking out from behind cover to sling her stones with

But she, Edwin and the frontline combatants had taken just enough attention away from Imoen to let her close with Dynaheir's position. Two hobgoblins who had just reached a position to fire at Dynaheir from behind were cut down by a wide angle cutting spell, which literally cut both hobgoblins in two.

**You have used a Blood Mage Spell, Defindo.**

**-25 to health.**

Cursing the impact to her health, Imoen looked around as a bellow from Ardenor reached her. Whatever he said caused several of the archers attacking Minsc and the others to her, and the other two magic users. At first she thought it was because of her use of spells, but as she looked back, she saw Ardenor charge forwards with two of the other hobgoblins to engage Branwen and the others.

Khalid was the first to reach them, and thus was the first to be sent to the ground with an overhand strike that slammed into Khalid's shield with such power that it sent the half-elf stumbling. As the strike hit, Khalid saw a notice flash in front of his face.

**Ardenor has used Power Strike!**

Since this was an attack the party had seen from Lamalha, there wasn't any further information, but there didn't need to be to tell Khalid his shield arm had just gone numb, and that his shield had been cracked along it's edge. Desperately, the swordsman twisted around to dodge another blow, his sword flicking out into a slash at the hobgoblin leader's nearest leg. But the hobgoblin simply stayed his ground, his armored greave taking the strike on his leg with barely a grimace. For his trouble, Khalid nearly lost his sword to a strike that took him the arm, his own plate mail deadening the blow though. Thankfully like Cleave there was a cool down period, and the blow wasn't a Power Strike.

Still, Khalid was able to set his feet and lash out several times in quick succession, moving around Ardenor's clumsy strikes, his speed and skill on display. But as he did, Ardenor took a blow on his mace's shaft, directing it to the side. The next moment, the enemy warrior had stepped in and did a move that Harry had tried to perform several times.

But even though he had learned the technique from Khalid, Harry could only impart some of the physical force of this move. That there was more to it was very apparent as Ardenor's shield seemed to thrum with energy arcing all around it in a corona as it smashed into Khalid's armor-clad chest, the energy exploding as the contact occurred.

**Ardenor has used Shield Bash.**

**This is a high level warrior skill only usable by level eighteen and on.**

**This move uses the shield to bash the enemy off balance. The enemy must make a saving check against Strength or lose his footing at best. At worst, he can be knocked entirely off his feet and unconscious from the sheer force of the strike.**

**Warning: as an activated skill, Shield Bash has a cooldown time. You can only use Shield Bash once every ninety seconds.**

Khalid cried out as he flew backward through the air landing on the ground, having trouble getting his breathing back.

Thankfully, Ardenor didn't have much time to capitalize as a second later an overhead strike smashed into his hastily upraised shield. The Cleave from the ranger shattered his shield, but Ardenor proved he was no mindless warrior as he flung the ruined shield at Minsc's feet a second later, causing the Ranger to stumble, his next strike going wide digging a furrow into the ground. Before the massive man could recover Ardenor stepped forward and his mace crashed into Minsc's helmet from the side, sent him stumbling to one knee. Had that strike hit anyone else in the party that blow might well have finished them off, but Minsc had both health and durability to spare and he roared as his sword flashed back, forcing Ardenor back.

Meanwhile, Imoen had stumbled into cover with Dynaheir. "Protego!" She stumbled as the drain of a second Blood Magic spell hit her, but the protective energy sphere covered the two women and Imoen shouting to be heard by Edwin who was outside the shield. "Okay, are you two willing to listen to me?"

Edwin grunted, but did move towards the two women, seeing two of the archers sling their weapons and charged forward with short swords. They didn't carry any shield, but seemed to think they could overcome his Protection From Normal Weapons or Imoen's Blood Magic in close range. *And perhaps they are right, I have not seen her use this spell before.*

As the two hobgoblins bypassed the already existing melee around Khalid, Minsc and Branwen, they began to hammer on the outside of Imoen's shield with her swords. The archers started to turn their attention away, believing the protection was two-way rather than one way, hoping to finish off the front line fighters quickly.

Imoen saw all this as Dynaheir nodded to her question, looking rather shamefaced. "I apologize Imoen, when I look at you I still see your age and experience, rather than your strength."

"Whatever," Imoen grunted, turning her attention to the battle around them. "I'll take care of the two sword users, but that's going to be it for me and Blood Magic until Branwen can heal me. The archers have clumped together on the left. Edwin, that's your target. Dynaheir, I think our friends need some help with that big bruiser. Magic missiles and keep them coming. Edwin and I will finish off the archers."

The attackers had started with ten, with nine more joining them. They had lost seven since, but the rest were still fighting, and even as Imoen spoke, the clump of archers was dispersing once more. The Chill seemed to be decently organized and trained despite being hobgoblins, and Imoen made a note of that.

Seconds later Both wizards had spells ready when Imoen's Protego failed. Her cutting spell took both of the attackers across the chest, cutting them both into two even bits. Then she grabbing out a bottle of wine, tossing it forward. Edwin's fireball struck a second later, slaying two of the archers and lighting several others splashed with cooking oil. Despite having moved enough to not get caught at the initial impact point, the three went up like bonfires shrieking as they ran away, completely panicking.

But the archers on the other side had taken Branwen under fire, and she was now down on the ground, several arrows in her back and side. She was still alive thanks to her armor stopping much of the arrow's power, and having been at full health going into this battle, but was out of the fight, using a healing spell to keep herself alive despite her wounds. Khalid on the other hand was back on his feet and ignoring the archers closed with Ardenor taking the pressure off Minsc for a moment.

A series of Magic Missiles crashed into the center of Ardenor's chest, shattering his entirely unmagical plate mail armor, and sent him sprawling backwards, but he was still able to stave off a strike from Khalid and dodge one from Minsc. The next second another series of Magic Missiles from Dynahier struck, and this time without any protective armor in the way, blew off chunks of his chest and arm. He was still alive though, and began roaring, his eyes glowing red as he once more called on one of his Warrior skills.

**Ardenor has used the Berserker skill.**

**Ardenor has used Power Strike.**

Khalid gasped as Ardenor's strike shattered his already battered shield and the arm underneath it, sending him stumbling backwards. But Khalid kept his wits about him, and even as he stumbled back his sword came up in a strike aimed not at the hobgoblin's body but at the arm holding his mace. The hit struck cleanly, cutting Ardenor's hand off at the wrist.

The next second, Minsc was there, running the man through with his Claymore. Even with more than a yard of steel stuck straight through his already ravaged body, Ardenor was still bellowing in berserk fury, waving his hands as if to punch at Minsc, who was standing well out of his range.

But instead of pulling away, Minsc shouted back, "But kicking for goodness!" And, with his sword stabbed through the hobgoblin leader, Minsc called on Cleave. Wrenching the blade up and out, the strike cut through ribs and everything else until exiting from the top of Ardenor's head, leaving him looking as if some giant had hacked into him, spraying blood everywhere.

Meanwhile, Imoen and Edwin had used arrows and magic to finish off the most of the remaining archers, while Branwen had gotten to her feet thanks to Dynaheir giving her cover fire, and had finished off one of the other two hobgoblins who had closed into melee range. The other lay dead nearby, slain earlier by Khalid or Minsc.

The remaining three archers took one look at their dead leader and instantly broke all three fleeing in every direction. Khalid grimly pulled out his longbow,, shooting one of them in the back, as another fell to a Flame Arrow from Dynaheir, and the third found himself suddenly frozen, as if he had been turned to stone.

**You have used Immobulus!**

**This Blood Mage Spell impedes the target's ability to move, freezing the target in place, somewhat like the Basilisk's Gaze, only not.**

**-10 to Health.**

Imoen's already low health finally got to her, and Imoen found her vision blurring along the edges as the consecutive use of her spells put her deeply into the red. "Definitely, definitely needs to put more into Constitution, dammit!" She muttered, even as she slumped to her knees, gasping in air. "Screw my decision to put my last points in strength and charisma!"

Fastidiously, Edwin cast one last Melf's Acid Arrow at the downed enemy, slaying him before pulling out one of the healing potions he had bought for to himself from the priest back in Nashkel. "Yes, your speed with those spells of yours is more than offset by the fact you cannot cast in succession. Unless you discover some other means to power them. Perhaps blood sacrifice?"

"Ugh... it pains me I even thought to take that suggestion seriously," Imoen grumbled, leaning against the unwounded Dynaheir. "Help Dyna, I'm falling to the Red Side."



“Never call me Dyna again and I will promise to save your soul from the Thayan,” Dynaheir promised, causing Edwin to sneer at both of them in disgust, striding forward on his own.

Thankfully for all concerned, Branwen had taken Imoen’s suggestion about her spell priorities to heart and barring one offensive spell and Spiritual Hammer, she had built her spellbook with healing magic in mind. Now those spells came in handy, keeping them all her feet, although none of them were in real fighting shape. “Damn! That was a tough fight. Did anyone else see more than an orange glow around the guy?” Imoen said, leaning against Minsc’s side now as he knelt beside her, with Dynaheir standing nearby.

“I o, o, only saw the orange g, g, glow,” Khalid said, shaking his head. And I only noticed that once we started to fight.

“And that’s another thing. Why in the world did you two charge forward like that?”

“It s, s, seemed a good idea at t, t, the time?” Khalid answered.

“Aye, and if Minsc had not charged forward, friend Khalid would have been hard pressed against that beast.”

“I’m just saying guys, that we need to start working together! More than his level, whatever that might have been, it was his ability to get his troops to fight together that made them dangerous. If not for Edwin’s protection spell and mine, we might have lost this fight simply because the Chill’s archers would have struck both of our magic users down, and me with them! Look, I know I don’t have anything like Harry’s leadership skills, and if someone else wants to give out orders in a fight, that’s fine by me. But none of this fight as individuals crap anymore! We just got a sign we cannot afford it, even against low level enemies.”

Everyone looked at one another, and Dynaheir nodded firmly. “Young Imoen is right. While all of us have more experience than she does, it was only Imoen who tried to make us work together. I suggest that from now on, we try to keep that in mind going forward.”

The others slowly nodded bar Edwin who merely grumbled that, “So long as you do not go so far as to try and control every spell my puissant self uses, I suppose I will follow your lead on the tactical level.

“I’ll take what I can get,” Imoen snarked right back, glancing at her some display again, noting her health was once more in the forties. “How are all of you feeling?”

“Pretty much like we look,” Branwen shot back, also looking a little shamefaced at how she had gone haring off again. *And this after nearly getting myself killed when I ran into those kobold traps in the Nashkel mines. I need to remember that there is more to battle than just closing with the enemy, Tempus take it.*

“How many healing spells,” Imoen began only to pause when she saw Branwen was already shaking her head.

“I’ve use them all up,” the blond announced. “We’re all at pretty much fighting health, but that Ardenor really took it out of Khalid and Minsc. And I was struck by far too many arrows to be healthy.”

“Cock,” Imoen grunted. “Alright, we’re going to keep going for now, plan to break every few hours every time one of you spots a place we can set up tonight in relative comfort. Its best we get some sleep tonight than push ourselves to exhaustion. And we won’t be of use to them if we arrive find them wounded and can’t do anything about it because we already used Branwen’s magic. Better to arrive late and actually be able to do something.”

Everyone else agreed with this while Khalid bit his lip hard enough to draw blood as he looked between them all, then out around the hills all around them. But he eventually nodded. “F, f, fine.”

He stood up from where he had been crouching without a word and began to lead the way away. The others started to follow, leaving Branwen and Imoen to take up the rear, Imoen shook her head, asking Branwen to wait. She stopped by Ardenor’s body, searching it quickly but efficiently. She found some gold, the fact his mace needed to be identified, and a single note. The note read:

You are a fool if you think I will side with you in your power struggle, Ardenor. As long as the Chill continue to obey my orders to sow discord across the Sword Coast, I do not care who leads them. Your weakness lost you the position, and you make yourself seem weaker begging to me for aid. Be careful, lest I think you too weak to serve at all, let alone in command.

Do not contact me again unless you do so as leader of the Chill once more.

S.

Reading this aloud caused Imoen smiled as a message appeared in front of her, the gold of an important message.

**The Iron Intake Issue quest has been updated. You have discovered a clue.**

**You had overheard talk that hobgoblins and other demi-humans were making trouble in places throughout the Sword Coast, much like the bandits you have already fought. Now you know that the Chill, a reputable mercenary group, is in the area, and under command to cause trouble.**

**It takes no great leap of logic to see they are involved in the Iron Intake Issue. So the Chill are obviously providing manpower to the secretive group moving behind the shadows, led by someone with the initial 'S'.**

Still smiling at her good fortune, Imoen looked around, only to realize that Minsc and the others had left her and Branwen behind, pulled along by Khalid's single-minded frustrations. "Shit, really!? Don't they remember they don't know where to go without me?"

"Anxiety knows no bounds such as that. Come, let us run and catch up with them," Branwen guffawed, clapping Imoen on the back so hard she nearly stumbled back to the ground.

"Gods damn it Harry, where are you? How am I supposed to keep this group together without you?" Imoen growled, even as she raced along a still chuckling Branwen.

**OOOOOOO**

Elsewhere, Harry had just finished the final touches on his seared fish skewers, when the message appeared in front of his eyes. "Huh, I wonder what Imoen and the others are up... to... wait, I can still see stuff like this despite the fact we're separated by so much distance?!" His eyes widening at the implications, Harry began to laugh like a madman who had just finished his latest creation for world domination. *Oh, I am so going to figure out how to communicate via the Party connection, and when we do...*

This was the sight Viconia came back to and she sighed. "Wonderful. The first surfer who I have remotely enjoyed being around, and indeed only the second male I might have come to respect has gone insane. Isn't that just typical."

That didn't stop Harry's laughter, indeed, it made him laugh all the harder right up until Viconia threatened him with her war hammer.

The next day, Harry and Viconia were attacked early in the morning while Harry was putting the finishing touches on breakfast, and Viconia was still laying out on her bedroll. She wasn't asleep, instead, she had turned on her side and was writing down something on a piece of parchment she had asked Harry to conjure up for her the day before with a long quill that she had taken from her item space, something she hadn't shown him the day before. What she was writing Harry had no idea, only that she was concentrating fully on it, rather than even acknowledging him that morning beyond a bare nod in his direction. However, when their guests arrived, her concentration wavered.

Two wildcats, a variety of wild animal Harry hadn't seen before prowled into the camp as if they owned the place, having completely bypassed the primitive traps he and Viconia had put up. From the chagrin on Viconia's face as she stared at them from her bedroll, she too found that somewhat galling. Although maybe not as much as Harry did for how the wildcats natural Hide in Shadows, like the spiders back in Beregost, had hidden them from his map. *There has got to be a way to pick out people and things hiding that way!*

The two animals were large, almost as large as a panther, but looked to be built along slightly bulkier lines, with heavier fore-shoulders, and wide, silent paws that made no noise as they moved. They also had large, tufted ears, and mouths full of long fangs as they hissed at Harry. The two of them moved apart, ready to leap at him from two different angles, forcing him to turn his head in either direction to follow them.

**A new page has been added to your bestiary.**

#### **Wildcat.**

**A rare animal to see most of the time, the primitive, wild cousin to the housecat is both larger and harder than his domesticated brethren. While normally it would avoid people, if hungry enough, these animals will attack humans or other adventurers.**

**Attitude towards adventurers: ambivalent. Much like cats, they can take or leave people depending on what mood takes them. Just don't expect to pet one.**

**Strengths: wildcats have their own variety of the normal Hide in Shadows skill that certain animals can exhibit. This allows them to move silently and unseen as per normal, but also to practically ignore traps of any nature. It makes them a particularly annoying neighbor to farmers who might be keeping livestock anywhere around the place.**

**Weaknesses: fire, normal weapons. While some varieties of wildcat might have evolved in highly magical areas and have magical resistances, these examples of the breed are very few and far between.**

Even as the animals advanced on them, Harry was already crafting the spell he wanted to use to deal with them. He wanted it to be a little creative and wanted to use a variety of magic he had yet to really work with, fearing the blood cost of it in this world, and honestly never having done much beyond the classwork for it.

*But Imoen told me my dad, my original one, was amazing at Transfiguration. So let's see if I can follow in his footsteps.* He gestured, and the first wildcat to leap towards them crashed into a wall that rose from the ground.

**You have used Blood Magic. -15 to health.**

*Wait, what, only fifteen for creating a wall like that? The same as the explosive tree spell?* That news astonished Harry, even as he rolled away from where he had been crouching a moment ago. He ended the roll and pushed back the way he had come, his sword in hand stepping into the beast before it could leap away. Yet despite his speed, the wildcat still was able to dodge most of his thrust, taking a

gash along its side rather than being stabbed. The first wildcat meanwhile was groggily getting to his feet, yowling in pain, its eyes crossed almost comically.

Harry backed away, his sword flicking out into the second wildcat's face, forcing it away. His eyes were wide with sudden surmise, and seeing that look on Harry's face, Viconia stopped from where she had been pushing herself to her feet, grasping her hammer from her item space. *That is the face of someone who has just had a revelation. I wonder what sort?* She thought, calming down somewhat.

Harry gestured with his other hand, and a blast of air thrust out into the wildcat's face as it came at him, hurling the creature up and away out of the camp towards the river just as he had imagined in his mind. It didn't reach the river, but the wildcat's caterwauling broke off with the abruptness of a broken neck as it crashed into the various rocks there. And just as he had hoped to see, the same notification appeared in front of his eyes followed by a experience announcement of a hundred and fifty experience.

**You have used blood magic. -15 to health.**

Harry turned to the other beast, about to use magic again to deal with him, awestruck at the revelation, and wondering how to explain it to Viconia, who was now watching him with one eyebrow rising. But he paused as he saw the beast's crossed eyes, as it stumbled to the side, its yowling now somewhat pitiful. Harry couldn't bring himself to finish the creature off, remembering some of the cats in Hogwarts and especially Professor McGonagall's feline form as he looked at it.

So he hesitated and was about to use a stupefy spell on the beast. But Viconia on the other hand showed no such hesitancy. Seeing Harry pause, she walked up behind the beast, and with a single methodical strike to the back of his head, slew it with her Warhammer. "You looked as if you were working something out there for momentary. I wished to let your thoughts run their course, but one should not allow inner revelations like that get in the way of winning a fight. Introspection can come after."

"Not a cat person are we?" Harry quipped, instead of replying to the question evident in Viconia's tone, thinking things through still.

Viconia huffed, and then her hands began to move, shifting this way and that as she used a Cure Medium Wounds spell to use on Harry which flashed through the intervening distance, instantly raising Harry's health by thirty. "My mother kept several. Vicious little monsters the lot of them. And I studied cats well enough to know that while wildcats like that are playful enough, their play is the kind that can turn into cruelty far too easily. I am in favor of a certain measure of cruelty when necessary, but it is not something one should take joy in, as far too many of my folk do."

She then moved to the fireplace, deftly taking the bubbling cauldron off of the fire and setting it aside, serving up to three bowls, and moving with two of them over to Jaheira, slowly feeding the woman even as her eyes tracked back to Harry. "Now, tell me what you were thinking of."

Amused by the dichotomy of Viconia's commanding tone and almost solicitous actions, as well as feeling more than a little bit of pride in how happy Viconia was at his food, Harry did as she bid. "I told you about how the spells we were using, Imoen and I, and that each of them had their own set cost

in terms of the amount of health they would drain from us. But my experiments yesterday and just now... each time I've experimented since, it took a flat cost of fifteen."

Viconia's eyes widened at that, staring at him in surprise. "Truly? Spells have levels to them, and all of them take a certain amount of intelligence and willpower, as exhibited by the need to gain levels to access many of them. I initially thought that your spells were much the same, and simply cost you more in a similar manner. I am... Uncertain as to what to make of what you just said."

Noticing the woman didn't look pleased at those words, Harry nodded, and then, with a flick of his wrist was holding his nearly ruined power shield. He said it on the ground beside him, along with his own food for the moment, far more interested in his experimentation than food at the present. Viconia's eyes watched the shield even as she listened to Harry. "One of the spells Imoen and I came up with is a repair spell, something we can use on items which have a durability rating. Regular items, like swords and war hammer's with no magic in them don't have a rating like that. But this shield is a magically enhanced item a plus one. I was able to repair it before. Each application of the repair spell gave us a certain amount of durability back. I can't remember how much durability but it wasn't a total repair."

Viconia followed his thoughts, also looking down at the shield then over at the wall which was already crumbling into dust from where it had risen from the ground. "None of the other... We cannot call them spells... Directed will perhaps? Somewhat wordy I will admit but it will do for now. Regardless, the outbursts of directed will you have experimented with do not have direct correlations to single spells you have used previously. You mentioned that you would've had to use two spells to do what you did to the tree before, and you did not mention anything about being able to control the very ground like that."

"Exactly. I thought at the time, that one spell taking up more health than one of those spells, but not as much as both combined would have been fair enough. But the spell to transmute the ground should have taken more. It was much harder to visualize the outburst of directed will as you put it with that than it was to do the compressed blast of air I used on the wildcat the next moment, although not as much as with the exploding tree. But it took the same amount of health to do all three."

"So there could be something wrong with the spells you have been using." Viconia smiled triumphantly at that. "It sounds more and more as if your Blood Magic gives you access to the same manner of control of magic a deity would have. Their workings often take willpower and strength, and your spells are doing much the same."

"Maybe. Let's see..." Harry answered, not sharing any of his own internal thoughts. *What was it called again when I first used a spell in this world? Cheating like a bitch, right? Because the spells I was using at the time and Imoen later used are not from this universe. Whatever underlying structure has created the game-like overlay everyone here can use had to scramble in order to make a space for our spells, just like it had to merge Imoen and Tonks' original selves.*

*But what if it wasn't just the spells themselves, but what fueled them that this world has issues with? If it's actually me and the spells, well me and Imoen anyway, then it makes sense that we were both getting hit with double the amount of penalties or whatever.*

It wasn't a direct correlation and Harry knew it. But the repair spell and the levitate spell he could experiment with. Not using the spoken version of the spells, not trying to form his magic into that kind of mold, but rather something different.

He stared down at his shield, remembering the first time he had spotted it pulling it out from behind several other shields in the Friendly Arm Inn's storage room, having spotted its greater properties through the other notifications. He remembered how it had looked at the time, and then, slowly changed that image, taking away some of the dents adding a little bit of shine to it, until he had an image in his mind of the shield fully restored to pristine glory rather than battered normality.

Viconia stayed silent, watching, her hands pausing from her self-appointed task of feeding Jaheira, wondering what thoughts were going through the god-born young man's head. Harry was a thinker, she had discerned that within moments of meeting him, and it was almost amusing to watch the thoughts in his head, because he lost all self-control of his face, his mouth twitching this way and that, forming a frown then a smile, then a grimace of exertion as she watched, his brows knitting together.

It was a level of openness that Viconia had never previously seen before, not even from her brother. *The merchant and his ilk were able to put on masks well enough at need, but that was all they were, masks. Harry I doubt would understand the need to do so at all, let alone be able to normally. It is strange, and something I should not get used to, yet also somewhat nice to be around someone so unguarded. Not that I will ever tell him that course.*

Ignoring a notification that just told him he had one ten interest points from Viconia for some reason, Harry slowly gestured his hands forward, thrusting out his will into the world.

As before with his spells, Viconia was able to track its building up, a glow appearing from Harry's hands and wrapping around the shield connecting him and the shield momentarily despite a good foot separating the two of them. A moment later, the shield flashed, distorting. There was a series of shrieks of warping metal, and when it stopped, the shield sat there, looking pristine, almost gleaming in the sunlight.

Eagerly Harry pulled up the information On the shield.

**Tower shield +1**

**Durability, 100/100.**

**A magically enhanced shield, this tower shield gives greater protection against all manner of weaponry. Although heavy enough to impede the movement or agility of those of fifteen strength were below, this shield has now been fully restored to its former glory and will continue to serve its owner well.**

And beyond that was another message, one Harry was just as eager to see.

**You have used a Blood Mage spell. -15 to health.**

"It's back to 100 durability, which I wouldn't have been able to do with a single spell! And, it cost the same again, fifteen health!"

Setting Jaheira's semi-empty bowl down, Viconia took a moment to cast a minor healing spell on Harry, restoring his health before turning to her own meal. Harry belatedly did the same, the both of them silent for a few moments as they worked their way through this, with Harry taking over feeding Jaheira afterward.

"Perhaps, perhaps the spells themselves, the ones your friend Imoen made up were part of the reason why the cost of your spells were all over the place as they were. The system of the Weave rejected them to a certain degree, not enough to completely disallow them, but enough to add a price on to their usage. Beyond that, I stand behind my earlier comment. The power within you is yours. Make it respond, make answer to you rather than simply assume that you know the limits of your powers. And in that fashion Harry, you can become strong!"

Now it was Harry who let out a snort in response, but didn't disabuse her words, instead simply reflecting that there seemed to be a lot of different names for the 'Gamer' system everyone else in this world could access to a certain degree. He had found several different names for it, but Harry felt it was probably created either by Mystra with the help of a lot of the other gods, or by Lord Ao the Over-god, the one who controlled the gods of this dimension and who had been the reason why the gods of light and dark had been thrown down during the Time of Troubles. *The man seems a righteous arse, but he's the only one who would have the power to create such a system when you think about all the aspects of it, the spawning, the dungeons, the levels, the stats, skills and everything else.*

But that was neither here nor there, and Harry concentrated back on the current conversation. "I think you're right. Maybe because of my murder-hobo heritage, my blood was imbued with a certain amount of magic, which I'm able to simply manipulate in various manners, completely separate from the Weave. But coming up with spells themselves was a little too much for the world as a whole to handle given the pre-existing schools of magic."

"Which demands the question: if you learn spells, cleric, druid, wizard or sorcerer spells, given your Paladin status, could you use them without any penalty? Or perhaps with a lesser penalty at any rate," Viconia mused. "Such spells are part of the world system that all adventurers can use, so only the source of their power would change. I will not be drawn on whether it would cost you more energy but, perhaps it could work."

Snickering, Harry decided to mix reality with the story of how it had been Imoen to discover the Blood Magic spells. "When Imoen first discovered the blood mage spells, she saw a popup, like all adventurers see pop-ups when they level up. It told her 'congratulations, you have cheated like a bitch'."

Viconia burst out into laughter. "HAHAHAHAHA!" The word bitch having been one that she had heard far too often since coming to the surface world, most of the time directed at her. But hearing it like this make it very clear what the intent of the words was, and she could only laugh wildly at the idea of somehow forcing the world system to respond in such a manner.

She slowly recovered, shaking her head from side to side, noticing with some amusement that Harry watched her silver hair like several varieties of surface world birds that she had seen it done in the past. *Is that the color that fascinates him, or the movement?* Setting that question aside for later experimentation, she turned her words to the conversation at hand. "If indeed you and your half sibling



are cheating in such a manner, then perhaps playing by the rules and using spells that already exist will further bypass your class restrictions.”

Harry nodded, then looked at her, cocking an eyebrow up. “Would you mind if I looked at your spell book?”

Reluctantly, Viconia pulled out her spellbook. This was not a simple item, for all that it looked like a regular book, its cover made of some blue leather, with a design of scales on it. But Harry had read in Candlekeep and had since seen that such books were sold bound to the individual, growing with the magic user. Each were largely unique, although they would obviously have the same kinds of spells as another cleric of the same deity or wizard of the same school would.

Each spell represented months if not years of rote spellcasting, occasionally working with magical foci or material components as they memorized the spells. When the individual spellcaster finally had their spells perfected, they then wrote those words into their spellbook, which had two parts to it, one the long term memory portion, and the other, the invocation portion. These were the spells the wizard, cleric, or druid prepared on a daily basis, transcribing them from the long term memory. They had to re-memorize the words or gestures every day to cast the spell correctly.

With levels came speed of casting and a greater access to spells the cleric or wizard found or learned as they rose in power. The higher level spells were more powerful or more mentally intense, but the magic users personal level also had a direct connection to how many spells they could keep in the invocation, or spell slot, segment of their spellbook. The higher the level, the more spells you could cast as well as the higher level of spells you have access to, although those spell slots were not evenly spaced across the levels.

For an example, as a level 7 cleric, Viconia had a total number of nine invocation slots per day. She had three slots for level one spells, three for level two, two for level three spells, and one for level four. She had yet to learn any higher spells, and Harry had read once that levels 5-8 were a bit of a dead zone for clerics in terms of learning new, high level spells. Instead they gained more slots for lower level ones,

Viconia watched Harry like a hawk as he took in the page she had opened it to, the Cure Light Wounds spell, represented by a large cross center of the page and a series of hand movements and words set around the cross. Harry stared at it, his hands moving through the motions described, with Viconia calling out corrections occasionally.

However, when he tried to cast the spell, nothing happened. It didn’t fizzle out, nor did Harry report any buildup of magic within his body. “It was like I was just waving my hands around and mumbling nonsense words for no reason.”

“Now, that can mean one of two things. One, your blood magic cannot substitute the magic needed to power our spells as clerics such as I need our gods to do. That makes sense, as cleric spells come from our chosen deities. Recall I mentioned I did not have access to spells when the Spider Queen cast me out until I proved my worth to Shar. Perhaps once you have pledged to a god, you will be able to use these spells.”

“Hmm, that might be why I don’t have a more than the one Lay On Hands spell, right?” Harry murmured.

“I would not know. Paladins are not exactly known in the Underdark, and I have not met one save in combat before this for obvious reasons,” Viconia drawled.

Chuckling, Harry raised his hand indicating she had scored a point, and asked her politely to share what she thought was the second reason his spells could have failed, and Viconia shrugged. “Our idea of using such spells was off, and there is a limit to how much cheating you can get away with. The only way to know that would be to try to learn a wizard or druid spell.”

“Well, with Jaheira unconscious, I rather doubt I would be able to access her spellbook.” As part of the soul binding, such items could not be removed from her person, nor even accessed without her consent. The spellbook only had a physical form when the magic user was using it, regardless of school.

“As for wizard spells, while we found one or two on our adventure, the wizards in my party took and added them to their spellbooks. I didn’t keep any, which I realize was a mistake. My and Imoen’s desire to keep our Blood Magic a secret bit us in the ass here. We should have found someone we could trust back in Candlekeep, blast it.” *But we both thought we had figured out our Blood Magic skills as best we could, that the local schools had nothing to do with ours... and I was going stir crazy relieving the same day for months on end. I still don’t know how long I was there before Imoen showed up, and I don’t think I want to.*

Grunting at that, Viconia nodded, wondering internally if even though his classification said paladin, that Harry would indeed be able to make a vow to any particular God. She could all too easily see his heritage held against him in such a moment. *There is also his own personal morals to consider, and while he is as helpful and righteous as paladins are supposed to be, I have yet to see the annoying sanctimoniousness that the breed is supposed to have. Yet even without access to any existing spells, Harry’s sheer flexibility is fascinating. That stone wall spell looks like a refined version of an Erupting Earth spell, but that is a mid-level wizard spell. As is the fact that Harry’s abilities are only limited through means of his imagination and ability to concentrate. I would wager that as he grows in level, his abilities to use this blood mage skill will also grow so long as he keeps working at it, irrespective of his Constitution.*

When Harry agreed to this point he was not at all surprised to see a pop-up window appear in front of him in the gold and red colors of a primary quest.

Grimacing a bit at that but acknowledging the AAS was right on that point, Harry explained what he had just seen to Viconia, who rolled her eyes. “Life itself is always the grandest prize of all, Harry of Candlekeep. Any tool you can use to turn events in your favor you should do so. That is the nature of power.”

“Yes, but I also have to be careful. Experimenting like this with you nearby and no other call on your healing spells is fine, but I can’t rely on that all the time. The rest of the world won’t pause for us while I experiment. And I think my imagination needs work. Doing that repair spell on my shield took

way too much concentration. Can you imagine me trying to do something like that, or something else that would turn a battle around, while I'm be fighting at the same time?"

"True, it could be troublesome," Viconia answered with a nod. "Yet that is the kind of thing that Druids and clerics such as myself often face. Many of us are front line combatants, and there are tricks and skills that you can use to better concentrate on multiple things at once."

This prompted another pop up, that of a side quest.

That was how they spent their morning, with Harry practicing the mental exercises that Viconia told him about, which consisted of training himself to concentrate only on one sense at a time, or tossing a rock between his hands as Viconia demeaned him, shouted at him, or even tossed stones of her own at his side and head. To say that Viconia enjoyed this was an understatement, but thankfully she only threw them just enough to distract.

This was a lot harder than it sounded, but Harry was progressing very well in it despite that, something Viconia noticed once the sun was high above them. "You seem to already have had some training in this methodology. That is good and will help you learn faster."

"I think it's actually my Leadership skill coming into play," Harry demurred. "I've learned to keep the whole battlefield in mind while also engaged in direct combat. This is a bit more internalized than that, but there are still parallels."

"True, you did mention your leadership skills. I will be interested in seeing these formations of yours in action," Viconia mused. "Although I am not looking forward to the reactions of your band to my presence."

"We're an eclectic bunch. I don't doubt that some of them will object, but I won't have people in my party acting like racists," Harry growled. "If they have had run-ins with your people and have actual bad memories, that is one thing and I can accept it even as I demand they move past it. But if they are simply letting prejudice guide their thoughts, that is something I'm going to hammer very, very hard."

Viconia nodded in acknowledgment a slight uptick of her lips serving as thanks instead of actually voicing the word. Although Harry noticed he didn't get any notification about gaining more respect or trust. Evidently with Viconia, talk was cheap, and she was waiting to see if he could back it up.

"Do you think Jaheira is good enough to move now?" Harry asked, staring up at the sky. "While my map is telling me in which direction Imoen and the others are, it's too small to tell me how far they are, and I'd rather be moving towards them rather than simply passively waiting for them to show up. And frankly, this place is wearing on me."

"Heh, I too would rather be active than passive. Waiting for your enemies to come to you is always a foolish move, unless you are in a place of power. This certainly is not such, and moreover you must realize that your destruction of these mines will have caused reverberations. The more you are out here in the wild, the more your opponents will have time to prepare."

“That goes both ways though,” Harry argued as they finished cleaning up their lunch, moving over to Jaheira whereupon Viconia laid a hand on the half Elven woman’s forehead. “We can also prepare. For instance, you’ve already helped me in a lot of ways.”

“As you have me, male,” Viconia retorted shaking her head. “You saved me from my pursuers and have willingly stated your wish to continue to defend me against such people in the future so long as I travel in your party and we have vowed to keep one another’s secrets. This is an equivalent exchange, do not think of us as simply friends helping one another, as I have heard many surface dwellers say.”

Harry winced at that, realizing the very idea of friendship was, while not entirely outside Viconia’s experience, something she had rarely else in the past. Perhaps with her brother who had sacrificed himself, maybe with one or two other people? But like Harry had originally been raised in a neglectful cold and semi-abusive household, so too had Viconia been brought up an entire society led by a matriarchal hierarchy built on cruelty and the idea that power makes right. “Well then, I hope to show you that friendship is its own reward, and while this relationship between us might have started as a mere transaction, who is to say what it can change into?”

Even as the words left his mouth, Harry winced, realizing how flirtatious that sounded. *Good grief, I did not mean it like that! Yes she’s sexy as all hell, but she’s going to be a party member, and having a fling with someone you are going to travel with strikes me as a really stupid idea.*

Thankfully for Harry’s ego or nerves, Viconia didn’t reply to that, beyond huffing under her breath in amusement. She had enjoyed talking to Harry the past two days, but that was scant consideration in her mind. If he had been a weakling, Viconia would never have even countenanced talking to him at all, let alone the exchange of promises and vows. Harry’s power mattered far more than the friendship he was offering her. If friendship grew from an exchange of strengths, then so be it.

After a moment of concentration, Viconia nodded, standing up from where she had been kneeling next to Jaheira. “While her thoughts might still be somewhat addled when she wakes, and I would prefer her to keep sleeping, the rest of her wounds have been healed.”

“Well, if she needs to keep sleeping until she wakes up on her own, I can carry her,” Harry answered with a shrug. “I might not be able to put her into my Item Box like I could if she was dead, but she isn’t exactly heavy... now that I’m no longer Crippled, anyway.”

Hearing that, Viconia’s lips twitched, wondering again if there was something going on between Jaheira and Harry. His willingness to go out of his way to help her, to protect her like this was something she was entirely unused to seeing save between those of family. And even then, not often. *Valas was the only one of my entire family willing to fight for me, after all.*

*Still, it is quite obvious that Harry gives his all to such acquaintances. I am entirely unused to such a thing, but... It is not unpleasant. Nor is it something I wish to become used to. After all, if his search for his enemy takes him to Baldur’s Gate, I will be forced to leave. There is no chance that the murder of that Calimshan merchant has not been discovered. And if such a thing occurs, having become soft will not serve me at all.*

**You have gained +100 Interest points from Viconia. You have lost -40 Respect from Viconia.**

Viconia is very much of two minds about your actions and your offer of friendship. A part of her is quite happy to have met someone who is willing to take her at face value and judge Viconia by her actions rather than preconceived notions of good and evil. Yet at the same time, she is very worried about becoming too used to such things, and thus losing her edge and her ability to identify threats.

Seeing that, Harry could only shake his head. He could understand both sides of that coin, although he very much preferred the first reaction to the latter. But he couldn't really say she was wrong to be concerned. Viconia was a drow, and like it or not, prejudice was a thing. *And unlike most prejudices back in my old world, most drow really are bloody evil.* Viconia would have to be on her guard here on the surface until she had as amazing a reputation as Drizzt Do'Urden.

But Harry hoped that eventually she would realize that lowering the walls around certain people was not such a weakness after all.

Soon, the camp was cleared, and Harry knelt down to one side of Jaheira. Viconia pulled the half-elven woman to a sitting position, then draping her over Harry's back. She then used a spare belt that they had taken from the corpses of her previous pursuers, tying Jaheira around Harry's back just in case, as her arms draped across his shoulders down his front. This left Jaheira's head to loll against one of Harry's shoulders, set into the padding made from strips of the cloth taken from the dead corpses so it wouldn't be jostled.

She watched as Harry moved around the camp with Jaheira on his back, getting used to her weight, and then pulling his Warhammer and tower shield and then sword out of his item space, practicing taking a stance and attacking. It looked very awkward, but it wasn't slowing Harry down as much as Viconia had feared. "Do you really think you will be able to rely on hand to hand combat with her on her back?" Viconia snorted. "I did not take you for that level of a fool, Abaloth."

"Animals that can use Hide in Shadows to get within biting range are a thing as we saw this morning. And I'd rather plan for the worst than assume otherwise," Harry rejoined, causing Viconia to snort as she knew he had a point. Harry had explained the map function to her before this, and she understood its limitations as well.

Moments later, the two of them were on their way, heading, according to Harry anyway, south by southwest. Viconia couldn't navigate here on the surface very well, and resolved once more to buy herself a compass at the earliest possible moment. Regardless, Viconia knew they were not retracing the steps she had taken, and that was all to the good in her opinion.

"Do you have any indication of how far away they are? Understand you can see the direction of your other party members, but..."

"No idea. My map can push out for about a mile in every direction, but that's all I can tell you. We have some walking to do," Harry answered, his tone philosophical. Viconia snorted at his tone but Harry had gotten used to that from her already and went on without any hurry. "So, do drow have word games or something else they can do to pass the time on a long march? Or would you be willing to play some of ours?"

"So long as you do not think I will be so foolish as to wager anything on the outcome of such games, I would be interested to know human style word games," Viconia chuckled without humor. "My

own people's tend to have a very violent or cruel tilt to them. Nor should you assume you need to fill up the silence with inane patter. If I become annoyed, I will inform you of it, and you had best take it as a given that pushing further will go poorly for you, male."

"So long as you call me Harry more than male or the other curse, I'm fine with that." Harry retorted then began one of the games that Imoen had come up with back in Candlekeep as they left the camp behind them.

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At the same time that Harry and Viconia were dealing with the inquisitive wildcat couple, Imoen was extremely unhappy and showing this with remarkable grasp of vocabulary that had all of her listeners even wincing or grinning in amusement, depending on their mood. "May the gods of the Mind Flayers sear their tiny brains to ash, why do these fucked up warped kangaroo-lookin' kobolds keep attacking us in threes or fours?! I'd understand if we were now running into their territory or something like that, but attacking us like this is only slowing us down and for no real gain either way."

The kobolds they had been dealing with were dumb, and lacked any kind of gold on them. Khalid or Minsc always spotted them moving through the scrub hills, the group slowed down, and waited to see if the kobolds spotted them and if not, the group turned away, shifting further south or north or even once back away from a group to keep from fighting their way through. And when the Kobolds did spot them, they closed quickly only to be dealt with by a rain of arrows and sling stones. Not once was a spell needed to deal with them, or even a sword, yet even that took time if not as much as changing direction.

"It's either go through them, or go around them," Edwin answered philosophically. "We made the choice of trying to go around them, and it is now unfortunately biting us on our collective rear. Far be it from me to say I told you so but, I did. When will you simians learn that Edwin Odesseiron is always right?"

"No one likes a smart arse Edwin." Grumbling, Imoen recast the point me spell twice, once for Harry, and once for Jaheira, while Branwen healed her up almost as it quickly. "Still in the same direction, still alive, still together. I'm going to stop using the second spell for now. Sorry Khalid, but there's no point to it, even if the health hit is only three points."

Khalid scowled, but did not argue and Imoen went on. "All we can do is just keep going. But going around these clumps of enemies is slowing us down too much. Minsc, Khalid," she looked at the two scouts. "Stay with us this time. Minsc, you can stay in Hide in Shadows, that'll give us a nice little dagger in their back. But from now on, we go straight there as a group. Khalid, you'll be out ahead of us a few dozen yards, that'll be enough to give us warning. We punch through anything that's in our way from now on."

"Very well, but I will warn you of the same thing that we ran into even when we had Harry's map. Animals can Hide in Shadows, as you learned with the giant spiders in that house in Beregost. And there are other ways to hide from even my senses," Khalid warned.

Minsc's voice almost overrode the half-elves and wasn't nearly as helpful. "While Boo says I am being too pedantic, whatever that means, I would say that a dagger in the back is not nearly as good as a

Claymore to the face! Further, daggers in the back are a certain sign of villainy at work, while Claymores to the face can be righteous depending on the mighty hand of goodness that wields them.”

“It was a figure of speech Minsc,” Imoen grumbled, although she smiled as he she did so, believing that Minsc had attempted to lighten the mood a bit. “And I know that Khalid. But we have Branwen here in case of a close ambush, and if they appear in long range, then it sucks to be them.”

Chuckling at that, Khalid nodded, and led the way ahead, his bow in hand and an arrow ready to be put to the string.

OOOOOO

Jaheira woke up groggily, somewhat annoyed that whatever bed or sleeping roll she was sleeping in was so hard. *Wait, it is not just hard, but bouncing...* For a moment as her eyes fluttered she could not figure out what was wrong, but then she matched these suggestion to other times she had been carried by acquaintances or her husband after pushing herself too hard or being wounded without another healer around.

The broad shoulders she felt did not match her husband which both annoyed and amused as she became somewhat more aware of her surroundings. As she did, a female voice she did not know announced, “Your burden is waking up, male. Best you slow down a bit. There’s that boulder over there you can set her down on easily.”

Moments later, Jaheira found herself sitting down on a boulder as Harry knelt halfway down, delicate fingers unlatching a belt from around their bodies. “H, Harry, what, where...” she stared at Viconia, her eyes widening in shock. “WHO!? A drow!?”

Before Jaheira could think, instinct took over, and her fingers scabbled for weapons which were not there. Not at her side, or indeed in her Item Space. Indeed, she had nothing in her Item Space. As she realized that, and that she was wearing her undershirt and leggings, Jaheira flushed, about to open her mouth and flay Harry to the bone. But then the memories came back to her. Of the dungeon, and of the final trap, of pain from the back of her head, and then... wetness? That last memory was a bit vague, but coupled with the rest caused her to pause.

“You see, Abaloth? It is as I said. None save you have been able to look past my race while on the surface,” the drow woman snarled, glaring at Jaheira.

Jaheira looked back at her coldly, crossing her arms over her chest as she tried to look as intimidating as she could in her under things. Which wasn’t very much, really, but Jaheira still tried. “I do not just see your race, woman, but my past experiences with Drow. Or are you telling me you would not see such as I in the same light were our positions reversed?”

“Hey now,” Harry growled, getting between them. “There will be none of that here. Jaheira, while I don’t know about your past meetings with Drow, Viconia isn’t one of the drow you ran into, right?” Jaheira nodded at that, as it was obvious, since all of them were dead. “Then don’t hold the actions of those drow against her. As for holding her race against Viconia, or you holding Jaheira’s against her, Viconia, that’s just simple racism, and I won’t have it in my party.”

**You have earned +100 Interest and +40 Respect with Viconia. She evidently likes the fact you are going through with your words about sticking up for her with your companions.**

To Harry's surprise, his words did not win or lose him any relationship points with Jaheira. Instead, she looked at Viconia with a scowl still on her face, but it slowly switched to a wry look. "Two questions. One, how long was I out?"

"Er... three or four days depending on when you start counting," Harry answered cautiously.

"And I suppose I have this... drow to thank for our recovery from whatever happened to us? And that I have you to thank for being alive?"

"Yes, and yes. And wasn't that three questions?" Harry snarked, causing Viconia to chortle.

"Hush, they were interconnected enough to count as one. This is a third though. I don't suppose you are in any way being mentally coerced or anything similar?" When Harry shook his head with an eyeroll, Jaheira looked over at Viconia, and gathering her will, did something that was almost physically painful. She apologized to a drow. "Then I thank you for your help. I am Jaheira of Tethyr, and I am in your debt."

Viconia's eyes widened, and she looked at Jaheira with respect. "I, I thank you for that. And I am Viconia DeVir, of the surface world now. I would not be welcome by nearly any of my folk should we ever meet such, bar this Drizzt individual I have heard of from Harry. And..." her eyes flicked to Harry before she shook her head. "Let us not talk about debt. Harry here helped me first."

"Ah, so you have truly developed a way of finding trouble that is like Gorion then," Jaheira drawled, before going on more seriously. "But tell me what happened to the two of us. My last memories are somewhat addled, but I recall, I recall the water claiming me, then nothing."

Listening to Harry explain their underwater adventure and the amount of injuries they had sustained, Jaheira shivered. The very idea of being awake as the water closed over her, as darkness of the underground tunnel consuming, frightened Jaheira more than nearly anything she had ever faced. And yet, both of them had come through it. Horribly wounded admittedly, but still alive. And Jaheira knew that had she been on her own, that would not have been the case.

"You, you saved my life," she said, staring at Harry and slowly shaking her head from side to side. "If I, or even if Khalid had gone with me instead of you, both of us would've drowned for certain, or been battered into too many pieces to be put back together again even by magic. But you, you saved my life."

Harry looked a little uncomfortable, something that Jaheira had noticed occasionally cropped up when he was given compliments. "Let's just call it even for all the times your spells kept me on my feet during a fight. Besides, I consider us friends, and in a life or death struggle, saving one another's lives should be kinda assumed you know?"

Snorting, Jaheira rolled her eyes. "Take the compliment young Harry. And I, I consider you a true friend as well, not just a traveling companion. Saving me, diving down into the water as you did, that is something only a true friend would do, not someone you were simply traveling with, no matter your alignment or how friendly you were."



As Jaheira spoke, two messages appeared in Harry's line of sight. One was in the normal blue, the other green.

**You have earned +5000 respect and +5000 trust points with Jaheira.**

**Jaheira is now a Friend, and able to become a Party Member.**

**Holy hell! You have climbed the mountain, you have made friends with Jaheira, the unrepentant, paranoid, standoffish, aloof half-elf. Is this a magical moment, or serendipity? Regardless, you have teamed the shrew to an extent that only her husband and a handful of others had done previously and both of you can grow stronger because of it.**

The second message was far shorter, but just as important.

**Would you like to add Jaheira to your party?**

Trying not to laugh at the somewhat astonished tone of the Advanced Adventuring System had taken Harry hit the yes button with a flick of his eyes, before looking at Jaheira. The blonde woman blinked as she in turn saw the same message that her husband, Minsc and Imoen had seen.

**You have become Friends with Harry Potter. Would you like to join his party?**

She looked across at Harry, indicating with a flick of her finger what she was seeing. "I would very much like to join your party Harry, although could you refrain from looking at my stats or anything else thus revealed until we reach Khalid and the others? I rather doubt you will see anything that you have not already seen in his, but sharing your stats with someone is somewhat too intimate for me to do with someone without my husband around."

"Understandable," Harry agreed instantly, and a moment later, Jaheira hit the accept button as Viconia looked on. And as Jaheira explained how she had just learned Backstab but could not learn Cleave due to class and strength restrictions, she became mildly irritated. Harry felt something of the sort as well since Cleave was both a strength and class restriction.

**Jaheira cannot learn Cleave.**

**As a druid, she believes that everything in nature has its place, and so such damage-dealing skills are not allowed to her... Despite being able to use Backstab. No one has ever accused the universe of being consistent.**

Regardless, the Backstab skill and having access to the party's Item Space plus all the other benefits of being in Harry's party was amazingly interesting. "Excellent. Thank you Harry Gorionson. I will be very interested to see my stats and everything else when we have a chance when we rejoin Khalid and the others. But now, let us hurry on."

Harry looked over to Jaheira, asking solicitously, "Do you think you're well enough to wear some armor and your weapons?" Even with item space, having your weapons on hand was just faster, and as Harry had already experienced, the item space wasn't willing to simply shift your armor directly onto your person mid battle.

Experimentally Jaheira crouched down, and then to Harry's amusement, actually performed a few push-ups, stretches and sit ups, testing her body for any lingering soreness. She found a few, but

none that worried her as she nodded at Harry. He transferred some of her armor and the other items over to her.

Jaheira put the chain mail and undershirt on quickly, resting the shield on her back and her club at her side, instead taking the staff she had been given by the Elder Dryad in hand as they continued on their way.

With the two women now ignoring one another, the trio moved off, only to pause as Harry held up a hand, pointing ahead of them. "Depending on the terrain, there is a band of red dots ahead of us that might be able to see us if we keep on this course. I'm all for diverting to our right to get away from them, unless you can tell me something about the terrain around here, Jaheira?"

"If we go right will start to come up into a series of hills. Whether or not those hills lead to a mountain or simply keeps going as hilly territory I cannot say from this far away. Would you like me to take point?" Given her ability to forest meld, Jaheira could hide herself as well as of the using Hide in Shadows, which made her the most useful scout of the three of them, especially given her half-elven eyesight. Viconia had much the same eyesight, but the sun blinded her at distances. "I'm sorry to say I have never been in this territory before, so anything I tell you will be but a guess built on what my experience and nature senses tell me."

Harry nodded, and Jaheira instantly began to call on her skill, fading away from side and heading away. But unlike with previous time she had done so, Harry smiled as the green dot indicating Jaheira stayed on his map.

Almost as soon as Jaheira had disappeared from her sight, Viconia snarled, "Well, that went about as well as one could expect, especially from a half elf. I'm very happy she did not attempt to attack me, or else I would've been forced to defend myself, regardless of our agreements, Harry of Candlekeep."

"She was able to step away from committing violence, and so were you. Yeah, I'll take that as a win," Harry drawled, refusing to take sides of the argument, believing both of them had shouted things that were better left unsaid and which came from past experiences and bigotry rather than the individual in front of them.

Viconia snorted, and Harry idly noted that he had lost -100 more Interest from her, which pretty much matched the amount he had won throughout the day. *I sense this is going to be a theme with Viconia.*

Ignorant of Harry's inner thoughts despite knowing about the relationship points system, Viconia agreed verbally with Harry's comment, before going on to say, "However, I would wager that Jaheira might well have attacked me had she had her weapons at the time."

Harry had nothing to say to that, and Viconia snorted again, amusement dancing her eyes as she looked at him, before gesturing in the same direction the Jaheira it disappeared in. "Come then human. Let us catch up with your half-elf acquaintance."

The way she said acquaintance was somewhat odd, but Harry let it go, merely picking up the pace to head after Jaheira, keeping one eye on the map at all times.

The three of them traveled like this for a time, with Jaheira pushing out ahead of them underneath her invisibility skill, only returning occasionally, turning back to get a proper direction from Harry. In this manner they moved around several groups of what Jaheira identified as wild animals and kobolds, who seems to dominate this area in terms of numbers. Harry idly wondered if that meant there was a respawn village nearby. *But we haven't entered an enemy zone, so that's doubtful.*

"There might well be, but I do not believe that it will be as close as you might assume, Kobold bands tend to spread out far more widely than you might think. They are not the same as the Xvarts we dealt with before, who tend to stay closer to their villages unless forced to spread out by stronger beasts," Jaheira warned, her words following Harry's thoughts.

"I find it annoying that such creatures can be found both above and below the ground. I wonder if kobolds are the rat equivalent of the monster world?" Viconia murmured.

Harry shrugged. "It does tend to look like it. If rats had shamans and special commandos who could fire fire arrows at you and traps that are an extremely dangerous threat. Let's break for an early dinner, and then we'll push on through the night. You two can see in the dark, and I have a ring of Infravision, so there's no need to stop."

Internally, Viconia wasn't happy with that idea, despite liking the idea of travelling at night. Her Constitution was such that she was having trouble keeping up already. But she refused to show weakness, and simply nodded, following on Harry's heels. Jaheira stayed with them as they ate on the move. As the sun began to glow red in the distance, she returned, urging them to turn back to their leftmost, heading further south word rather than Southwest at one point. If they kept on going the direction they were heading before, they would run into further hills, quite rocky ones, which would be difficult to move through.

When the trio followed Jaheira's suggestion, they broke out from the scrub brush onto a flat rocky plane, much like Harry had seen pictures of Mongolia or places in America, but with rockier soil. There, Jaheira's forest melding, which hadn't been perfect up to this point anyway, failed her completely, and she waited for them to catch up to her. Regardless, they were soon on their way once more, as above them, the sun continued to fall.

**OOOOOO**

Imoen's hope of cutting their way through whatever enemy was between them, Harry and Jaheira rather than wasting more time going around was challenged for the first time a little bit over an hour later. Ahead of the rest of the party, Khalid held up a hand, then pointed to the side of his helmet, indicating that he was hearing something in the distance.

The others caught up to the half elf, who pointed directly ahead of them at a small break in the rolling hills a small ravine that looked to lead down to flatter terrain. That was a good thing, in Imoen's opinion. The going for the last few hours been pleasant. They had been going uphill for that entire time and it wasn't like there was a trail or anything like that out here.

Khalid's words though were less welcome. "I, I, I'm hearing the sounds of wild d, d, dogs or another pack of kobolds. If it is k, k, kobolds, and then t, t, they're on the trail of s, s, something.

Kobolds never yip s, s, so loudly unless t, t, they are on the trail of s, s, something. And they're h, h, heading this way."

"A suggestion then. Ugh, to still be in the position of needing to make suggestions rather than commands," Edwin grumbled before going on, pointing out the same terrain feature Imoen had spotted. "There seems to be a small ravine almost there, at the edge of my eyesight but in the same direction we are going. I imagine that several of us could hide along the sides of it, awaiting whatever is coming our way. Thus we can know instantly whether or not whatever is going on is worth our time or energy to deal with."

"For once, I believe the overly-groomed wizard has a point," Branwen mused. "If the kobolds are chasing some other monster, why bother getting involved? If we can hide well enough to fool them, anyway."

"Bah, that is pure jealousy talking. You only wish you could be as well groomed and poised as I, Cleric," Edwin scoffed.

Ignoring Edwin's comment, and Branwen's reply of a snicker and throwing her head back to show off her long blonde hair, Imoen nodded. "Point. And if we can hide ourselves, we can set up a little bit of an ambush, and at least make the fight quick if it comes to it." She looked at the two wizards, asking politely for them to prepare a magic missile spell each, but hold off on using them if it was just kobolds. The wizards had only been able to memorize a portion of their daily spells the night before due to their sleeping conditions, which meant they had to conserve their spells.

"You have been awfully quiet large one. What troubles you so?" Dynaheir said, looking over to Minsc.

Imoen realized with a start that she hadn't heard Minsc shouting out about justice or even speaking to Boo for several hours, not since she had made the decision to just go straight ahead rather than avoid trouble. That really wasn't like him, and now Imoen looked at him as well, while in the distance faint sounds could be heard through the rocks and scattered trees.

"Minsc is faintly troubled. I am a ranger as you well know fair Dynaheir, although I have not been in this area of the world before and do not know the signs of all the animals both large and squishy that abound in nature. And yet, there have been some strange signs for the last few hours. The fact that they have continued for so long is also strange to me. Strange slash marks on the ground, small holes well covered but smelly, as if an animal had left behind its droppings, and the sight of trees downed not from action of lightning or wind, but from below."

Khalid became instantly concerned, even as he gestured the others to start hiding themselves. "The k, k, kobolds might not have good e, e, eyesight during the day, but w, w, whatever they are chasing might. B, b, best to get undercover now. And M, m, Minsc, could you come with m, m, me? Explain these m, m, markings you've seen."

With that, the group split off. Branwen, Imoen and Edwin found themselves on one side of the shallow ravine, hiding behind a series of boulders. Edwin poised behind a bush growing out of them, which would do little to nothing to slow his magic missiles but did an alright job of hiding him from sight... or would if he wasn't wearing red robes against a light green, brown and gray background.

*Wizards in this world would fit right in with the Wizarding World back home, I swear,* Imoen mentally snickered, enjoying the irony as she activated Hide in Shadows, her bow in hand just in case. Beside her, Branwen simply hid behind a rock, laying almost flat in order to hide her body from sight, and doing a decent job of it too, her sling by her side.

On the other side of the shallow ravine, Khalid had pulled his cloak around himself, and somehow crouching between a dead tree and the rock he became almost invisible to the point that even Imoen had trouble spotting him despite having followed his movement with her eyes for a part of the time. It wasn't a specific skill, just the half elf's hunting skill coming out in another manner. Minsc had also pulled Hide in Shadows around himself, while Dynaheir proved Imoen's earlier concerns about magic users. She had lain out beside a downed tree, but her hair was visible above it, and a bit of her cloak peeked out between cracks in the tree. *Note to self, take the whole wizards robes not being built for hiding more seriously in the future.*

Luckily for the ambushers, neither the kobolds nor their quarry seemed to have any attention to spare for their surroundings.

Their quarry was a human, which complicated matters in Imoen's opinion. *Why couldn't it be another monster?* The runner seemed a young man, maybe around Imoen's age, maybe a little older. He was dressed like a thief, complete with a hood, which had blown back from his face by the speed of his running, and he was breathing raggedly, staring behind and all around him, his eyes wide with horror.

"Good grief, what a weak-willed young man. While running away from a powerful foe is only the path to wisdom, running frightened like that from small pack of four kobolds is something else. Even a level one, should be embarrassed by that," Edwin grumbled. "Please don't tell me we're going to step in to help this fool? It is a waste of our time and effort, as he will most likely die if faced with a slightly more aggressive than normal chicken."

While Branwen laughed at Edwin's words, she made no reply, gripping her sling, ready to jump out. But Imoen knew that Edwin wasn't making a joke, he was being serious. The idea of saving a random stranger was just not one Edwin would normally contemplate. Not unless he knew they could pay for their rescue.

Alas for Edwin's sensibilities the kobolds had spotted the ambushers. One of the kobolds barked to the others in their language, pointing to the side, where Dynaheir's hair could be seen sticking over the top of the downed tree. Two of the kobolds instantly began to pull bows off their backs, while the others fell back towards them, looking around in some confusion and worry. Kobolds were not the bravest of creatures, but they were intelligent enough to know that if there was one person hiding nearby, there might be more.

This did not save them. Imoen fired her arrow, her Hide in Shadows failing. "No spells but take them down."

It was almost over before the young man the kobolds had been chasing could blink. Arrows and slingstones rained down from either side, killing three of the four kobolds almost instantly. The fourth kobold squeaked in horror, turned and tried to run, but two arrows from Minsc and Khalid took him from behind, sending him down to join his fellows.

With the four kobolds down, Imoen made her way down towards the young man, her hands now empty to show she came in peace. "Hey, it's all right now."

The young man apparently did not agree, because his response to her gentle words was, "Ahh! W, who are you!? Don't kill me, I'll give it back, just don't kill me, don't let him get me!"

Imoen instantly backed up, remembering one of the first real pieces of advice she had ever gotten in the Auror corps. *Never get close to crazy if you can help it. You don't know what they'll do, and it might be contagious.* "Easy their guy, we're not whoever you think we are and the kobolds are gone. No one's going to hurt you here."

"Speak for yourself, I have half a mind to smack him upside the head for being so yellow-livered," Branwen murmured, having moved forward to join Imoen while the others remained where they were, watching just in case there was more trouble coming. "Cowardice is an affront to Tempus, and the fact that makes me agree with Edwin's earlier joke only adds to my ire."

Ignoring the blonde cleric's words, Imoen continued to hold her hands up as the man babbled, "No, no. Not the kobolds, the horrible demise I see in my mind every time every time I close my eyes! Can't concentrate my mind, my mind... I didn't mean it! I'll give it back!"

His eyes suddenly latched onto Imoen like a drowning man on a lifeline, causing her to take another step back, as he stepped forward, suddenly pulling out a dagger from his belt, holding it out to her, hilt first thankfully, or else he might have taken a few arrows in the chest. "You, you can return it, you can take it, give it back!"

"Give back what, the dagger? Who are we talking about here?" Imoen said, backing away again to put Branwen between the madman and her. Branwen had no issue with this and had already grabbed her hammer from her belt, holding it in one hand at the ready.

"A cave, east of here, a cave I opened, oh I disturbed its slumber, I was, I was foolish, I," the man babbled. "It haunts me, and I get no rest! Please, take it, take this dagger to the tomb."

At that, Branwen and Imoen both stepped back almost as one, one because she was not pleased with what she was hearing, and the other because she could see a side quest coming a mile away. *Let's hear it for being genre savvy folks!* Imoen thought. "No way! Just drop the damn thing, I'm not touching it and neither is Branwen."

"Indeed foolish one! If you disturbed the rest of the dead, then whatever happens is on your own head, and I will have no part it," Branwen added.

"Just take it! I will do nothing more to do with it." The man then flipped the dagger and tossed it towards Branwen to land at her feet. "I will not have the dead be my doom!"

And with that, the man raced towards the two women, disappearing into Hide in Shadows between one moment and the next with an adroit use of the skill that caused Imoen to blink in surprise. Given his previous actions, she hadn't thought the cowardly idiot would be able to use a skill like that. Then he was past them, only the sound of his running feet giving away his position for a moment. The dagger remained where it had been thrown, at Branwen's feet.

Moments later, the others moved down from their ambush points to join the two women, and Imoen, who had not moved to pick up the dagger, held up a hand. "All those in favor of not touching the dagger of nope say Aye?"

"Aye," came several voices, with Dynaheir adding, "if that fellow is truly being haunted by a spell from an undead Lich or even some lesser spirit, the spell might have been on the dagger itself. It will not let him go unless someone does return the dagger."

"Exactly. I'm not touchin' nothin'. What about the idea of returning it though?" Imoen asked, giving herself a slight Cockney accent for a second causing Branwen and Minsc to laugh.

Once more, Dynaheir spoke up first. "Normally I would be for doing so, simply because it is a good thing to do to save a life. But given the way he just tossed it at you and ran, I do not think we are under any obligation to do so, given our own task the present moment. Two lives weigh against one in this."

"I for my part would be interested to see if there were any actual magic to be learned or a secret to be discovered here but would rather not do so and help such a quivering simpleton," Edwin grumbled.

"Let's be off," Khalid said, the tone of voice almost coming out is in order.

"Minsc would rather help the foolish young man, for doing so is an act of goodness. But my Witch is correct. We needs must hurry to find Harry and fair Jaheira, lest some evil befall them without Minsc's mighty boot to defend them. Perhaps we can see to this on the way back?" Minsc suggested.

"That works. I'm still not going to touch the dagger though. Anyone have a bag that it can be placed in? And then put in our Item Space?"

To Imoen's suggestion, Khalid offered a small pouch, an extra slingstone pouch that he kept on him. With the dagger dropped in via a Leviosa spell from Imoen, he then put into his Item Space, and peremptorily pointed them all further down towards the direction the Point Me-enchanted stick had been pointing before this issue had begun. Imoen picked the stick up again, holding it in her palm, watching it shift to point in the correct direction before nodding to Khalid, who instantly moved ahead of the rest of the group, who trailed behind him.

At that point, Branwen remembered the earlier conversation with Minsc, looking between the half Elven the ranger shouting out, "By the way Khalid, did you and Minsc decide what kind of animal he was seeing signs of?"

Khalid paused, turning to us shout back, "Ankheg."

That single word caused a shiver to go up Branwen, Dynaheir and Edwin spines, and all three of them began to look around warily, even as Imoen looked on in confusion. "What is an Ankheg? I mean I know the name, I've heard it a few times before, but I always thought of it as some kind of giant mole creature... wait, wasn't there something back in Berefof about the smith there paying for their hide..."

"You have the giant part of that statement correct, the rest however? Perhaps you should have spent more time reading, rather than practicing your japery?" Edwin scoffed, even as they followed the others.

That caused Imoen to scowl and start an argument with him even as they followed the others still following Imoen's directions. Imoen got so into the argument that her time in Candlekeep meant she had read more books than Edwin would ever see let alone read that she completely forgot about the actual question she had been asking, until the question was answered in no uncertain terms a few hours later.

The sun was setting by the time they had broken out from the last of the hills and rocky areas onto a kind of plane. The terrain here reminded Imoen of cartoon pictures she had seen growing up of America's Wild West, semi-arid land stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction, and Minsc noticed that he was seeing signs of wilds horses.

And it was here where the question about what an Ankheg was became moot.

Khalid had paused, staring out into the distance. His half-elven sight let him see much further away than most would have and he wanted to take advantage of the fact that there was nothing blocking his line of sight now. The others joined them, and he was about to open his mouth, when there came a rumble under their feet.

"Scatter!" Edwin shouted first, with the others all shouting the same thing, everyone racing in different directions. A second later to one side of where Minsc had been standing a large mound of earth about the same size as Imoen laying down burst up and out, pushed from below.

What popped out of the ground was a real monster. Five feet across and at least fifteen feet long perhaps, depending on how much was still below ground, the monster looked like a cross between a ant and a praying mantis to Imoen's eyes, with wide, multifaceted eyes and large mandibles click getting as they stared at the humans. It's huge, mantis like forearms were as thick across as Minsc's legs for most of their length, the edges of their natural blades looking immensely sharp, but also covered in some greenish muck dripping down from small slits in the side of the arm.

Thankfully the monster's first blow was a backhand as everyone had scattered, but this only meant that instead of trying to slice Minsc in half the strike merely sent the large man flying.

He rolled with the hit, coming back up with his Claymore in hand. "Foul monster, you sneaky ways will not avail you against the team of Minsc and Boo! Though you are large and strong, you will still be squished by the mighty boot of justice like the evil mosquito before you!"

From where he ran off, Khalid turned quickly and fired, aiming for the monster's eyes. But his arrow shattered on the ankheg's armor, causing him to curse. "Switch to fire arrows or magic! Regular attacks won't do anything to them."

"Them?" Imoen demanded, even as she obeyed, sending a blasting spell towards the ankheg.

Once more, the world answered her question for her rather than her companions. Even as her spell struck there came several more rumblings, and three more ankheg burst out from the ground. One of them sent a spray of green gunk Edwin's way, and he cried out in agony. Even though he had dodged much of it some of the gunk hit his foot, sizzling and melting its way through his armor and foot at the same time as if it was acid.



“Oh. Them,” Imoen whimpered, seeing the one she had struck with a blasting curse still alive as the smoke cleared, lashing out with another acid spitter attack towards Khalid. His shield caught the acid mucus, but instantly began to sizzle and pop as the acid ate into the metal and wood of the shield with ease.

The swordsman tossed it away, and closed, his blade lashing out with all the speed and skill the half-elven warrior possessed. Khalid’s longsword was magical in nature Imoen remembered, +1 to attack and +4 to defense if she remembered correctly. That meant it was one of the few weapons in their arsenal which might actually damage these creatures.

Imoen however had concentrated too much on that one aspect of the fight, and the other Ankheg were also attacking. Two had popped up so close Minsc was now fighting to keep their attention in him as Dynaheir raced away, and the other had joined it’s fellow in spitting out insanely dangerous acid attacks. Branwen was nearly killed almost instantly last minute sacrifice of her shield defending her head from an acid strike. But this defended her long enough for her healing spell to take care of Edwin’s foot, letting him get back to his feet.

It fell to Dynaheir to point out the group’s disadvantageous position. “Back! Get some distance. Minsc, switch to that halberd of yours! Your Claymore will do nothing to these creatures!”

Dodging around a strike from one of the monsters who had burrowed nearly under the group, Imoen activated her Fight Like a Jackrabbit skill, adding to her evasion skill and strength. It wouldn’t last long, not even ten minutes, but Imoen hoped that would be enough. She also discarded the idea of using short sword. Although a magical +1 weapon, it just lacked the range she needed to fight these monsters effectively.

“Lacero!” At her Blood Magic spell, a fire whip appeared in her hand. Instantly she leaped upward, evading a strike from another ankheg almost automatically thanks to her activated skill. While in the air, she lashed out at it in turn with her fire whip, catching the bug monster across one of it’s huge eyes, which seemed to be natural weak point.

**Critical Hit! You have landed a lucky strike on an enemy ankheg’s eye.**

**Although it did not succeed in blinding it, the pain from the wound will impact it’s combat effectiveness going forward.**

The ankheg screamed, falling back into its hole for a moment.

But just as it did so, another one came up from below, bursting out from behind her. Thanks to her skill she was able to dodge its first slashing attacks, lashing out with her whip, but a third strike caught her underneath her arms, hammering into her ribs and tossing her away with a cry of pain as she felt several of them groan under the impact despite her armor.

Spells now rained down from Dynaheir and the healed Edwin a series of Acid Arrow and Magic Missiles hitting the first, already wounded monster, the one who Imoen had hit earlier with a Bombarda. Their spells, aimed at weak points in it’s armor, did a lot of damage, forcing it to burrow away. The same could not be said for the ones engaging Branwen and Minsc, and Khalid had been flung away earlier by that same monster, his helmet smashed off and blood running from a deep gash to the side of his head.

And even as the one monster retreated that left three of the monsters, with one of them in close, and two of them launching acid spitter attacks. One such came towards Imoen, and she hastily shouted out, "Protego!"

The shield was struck by the acid, which stuck to it, sizzling and biting into the magic, but not getting through as she heard a shout nearby from Dynaheir to Edwin, "dammit, they have a fire resistance you fool! Switch to something else."

"Do not order me about woman!" The pain response came. The wizard of Thay's foot had been healed by Branwen, but he was still in a good deal of pain from it.

"Retreat! Edwin, use Summon Monsters!" Imoen shouted, canceling her Protego and hopping away, ducking under another acid attack from an ankheg as the one she wounded just now popped out of the ground to come at her again enraged from the injury but showing no sign of it. "Retreat!"

**OOOOOO**

While Imoen and the others began to fight for their lives against a nigh-overwhelming foe, Harry, Jaheira and Viconia were making their way towards them, when Harry paused scratching at his lightning bolt scar thoughtfully. The two women turned to look at him, with Jaheira asking, "you see something on your map I take it?"

"I wonder if I will be able to get a skill that will let me share my map with my party members. That and communicate directly between us. That time I saw an update to the Iron Intake Issue is still in my mind," Harry mused, staring ahead of them. "Anyway, We just entered an enemy zone. But there is a blue dot out there. Right in our way too."

"Blue dot?" Viconia inquired. "That is not the color of an enemy correct, you said that was red. Broken enemies are yellow and allies, green. You did not mention blue." She did not question the enemy zone comment. Whether or not a beast spawned was immaterial to her, the whole world was dangerous to her.

Ignoring the faint tone of disapproval that Viconia was giving him, Harry nodded. "Blue is neutral. Peasants, bar keepers, farmers, people like that. What one is doing all the way out here, I have no idea. The question is, should we see what is going on, or avoid it?"

"We go straight," Jaheira declared firmly. "I have been seeing signs of Ankheg for the last two leagues or so, and if some fool is out here treasure hunting or what you have you, we will need to save him from his own idiocy. Besides, hurrying along as fast as we can out of this territory is a very good idea, and going forward will hopefully be faster than going back."

*I do not wish to fight Ankheg in my weakened state. The last time Khalid and I fought them, we had our original levels, and it was simple enough then. Now? We would be hard-pressed to fight two of the creatures as a full party, let alone with Harry, DeVir and myself. Although, he does have access to his Blood Magic, so perhaps we could win? Regardless, whatever this fool is ahead of us needs to be informed his danger.*

About fifteen minutes of walking brought them to the point Harry could see the individual ahead of them. Instantly, Harry was able to identify him, and read the notification aloud. "Narcillicus

Harwilliger Neen, level 7 mage, the Slime Enthusiast. Narcillicus is a middle-aged man who seems to be obsessed with something that he is doing currently with two long, thin cages on the ground beside him, to almost the exclusion of all else. Huh, I can't see the cages from here."

"I can, and really? Slime Enthusiast? The name does not conjure good images," Jaheira murmured, shaking her head.

"Indeed. Are you certain we must save this fool from being out here in a dangerous environment?" Viconia asked, showing the first moment of solidarity the two women had since Jaheira it woken up.

Harry thought that was a good sign, and decided that, although a part of him wanted to save the man regardless, that Jaheira should make the choice to continue going forward or not. She did with a nod of her head, and the three of them troops closer. Soon they closed and, since they had made no move to hide their footsteps, Narcillicus became aware of them. He turned from where he was standing casting some kind of spell into the cages beside him.

But at the same time, Harry nearly let out a whoop, the one fist into the air. This caused Jaheira and Viconia to look at him in surprise, and he smiled widely at them both. "The arrows of Minsc Imoen and Khalid, they just turned to green dots at the far edge of my map."

Before Jaheira could respond to that bit of good news, Harry's face suddenly becoming serious. "And something just ambushed them from close-up."

"Ambushed them, how?" Jaheira questioned hurriedly.

"I can't tell from this far away, but it looks like ambush at a slight distance? Not at the far end of arrow range for sure, maybe darts? We need to get within eyesight for me to use my Identify skill."

Harry watched for a few seconds and saw a third red dot joining the other two, further away from the others, but still close enough to engage Imoen and the others obviously, followed by two more. "Three more dots joined them and neither of the other two have gone down yet as they would have if they were spiders or maybe even adventurers using invisibility potions. Fuck."

As the two of them had been speaking, the three travelers had continued forward. Now they were in decent range for a dialogue, and Narcillicus spoke up before Harry could suggest they skirt around the man and his odd cages. "Ah, strangers! Excellent. You are just in time to witness the culmination of my experiment."

"When anyone uses the word experiment in such a manner, I normally look around for the torture devices," Viconia growled from the depths of her hood, taking a step back and to the side of Harry and Jaheira, looking around them warily.

"None of that, or rather none of that on human beings at any rate. No, my experiment have to do completely with slimes," Narcillicus answered, seeming to take no offense at Viconia's words in his enthusiasm. Although, he did seem to notice Viconia's feminine form underneath her cloak, as well as Jaheira's face, looking between them and Harry with a tinge of what looked like jealousy for a moment before continuing his response to Viconia's words in a obviously prepared monologue.

"I believe I have developed a spell to empathically control any gelatinous creature and bend it to the will of the spell user. Slimes, jellies, oozes, all of these can now be controlled and turned on other enemies! Can you imagine that, imagine turning a dungeon's own creatures against their fellows? At this point the spells takes an entire hour to caste and several reagents but both will be minimized with further experimentation, I am sure. I have finished casting, and now I await the time the spell will take to sink into the two mustard jellies that I have caged here. Rejoice stranger! Soon you shall bear witness to the results of my endeavor."

Jaheira was the most experienced the trio and had fought several varieties of jellies and slimes before this. Recognizing the mustard jellies name, Jaheira stared at the man in horror. "Are you mad, man? Releasing mustard jellies into the local environment without knowing whether or not you will be in control of them?!"

Her tone and words seemed to touch something within Narcillicus to the quick and he glared at Jaheira, stabbing an angry finger at her just as the containers opened. "You dare to mock me! I have spent years working for this, and you, you strangers, you are just like all the others, calling me mad, deriding my work, my passions. Well, I will show you!"

### Mustard Jelly

**A type of Slime, these Jellies are normally found in deep, dark, and above all poisoned or befouled territories, like sewers or swamps. Like all such creatures, oozes eat through dissolving anyone caught within their bodies causing tremendous pain to the victim as they meet a slimy death. They are slow to move their bulk, but quick to attack, and have both a long range and short range attack**

**Strengths: They are completely immune to ormal weapons, electricity, piercing damage and many other forms of attacks, especially missiles, cold and magic. Like other slimes, they are not intelligent enough to feel fear, although they can feel pain. Their attack deals poison and slow damage unless the target makes a defense save.**

**Weaknesses: Like all slimes, fire is the best weapon against these creatures. Slashing damage is also effective. They are also slow moving, so getting away from them is somewhat easy if you need to run.**

**Attitude towards Adventurers: Like other slimes, Mustard Jellies do not possess enough intelligence or cunning to tell Adventurers from anything else that moves and is red-blooded. Alas, this just means they will eat an Adventurer just as easily as they would an animal.**

The two slime monsters moved to either side of Narcillicus at some unspoken command, and the wizard leered at Jaheira's eyes alight with the madness of a little man too often taunted and now suddenly given power over others. "You see! My slimes are now under my command. Indeed, I think you have come upon me now not as witnesses, but as the other side of the experiment. Come my beauties, show these fools your might!"

With that, the two mustard jellies, who had previously been yellow on Harry's map, turned red along with the mage who instantly began to move his hands to create a spell.

However, Viconia had been prepared, and a spell lashed out from her to crash into the man before he could finish his own. Her Hold Person spell failed, but did cause the wizard to stumbl back, his own spell dissipating from his hands. It was very evident he didn't have much combat experience.

But the mustard jellies moved forward, and Jaheira pulled back hastily. "They will be immune to all normal damage! Your magic sword might do some slashing damage to them, but I do not know about your blood mage spells, and I am going to be useless here!"

Harry nodded, having the new entry to his bestiary that had popped up into his face a moment before even as he worryingly looked at his map, where four red dots had surrounded the rest of his group, and undoubtedly the rest of their traveling companions. *At least they have killed one of whatever the heck they're fighting.*

Setting that aside with an ease he put down to his Leadership and Tactics skills, Harry concentrated on the here and now, smacking aside an attack from one of the mustard jellies with his shield, which did not sizzle or start to degrade under the strike thanks to its own magical properties. "They're immune to electricity but not fire!" He shouted and cast his own spell. Harry imagined the spell like a flare of flame appearing from the front of his shield and blasting outward in an arc.

Keeping the image in his head was tough, but luckily, for him anyway, the two mustard jellies had turned their attention to Viconia, whose spell had wounded thier master. She cried out as one of them struck her, it's long-range spitting like attack hitting her and instantly casting two debuffs on her.

**Viconia has been hit by Slow. This debuff will cause her to move at half her normal Dexterity-given speed.**

**This will last for forty minutes unless the spell is dispelled.**

**Viconia is Poisoned. Viconia will lose one point of health for every half a minute until dispelled. Further, the pain of it will make it nearly impossible to cast spells.**

At the same time, Jaheira had closed, but as she had feared, her staff didn't seem to do enough damage. She fell back quickly, casting Barkskin on Herself and Harry, the spells coming from her staff, which the Ancient Dryad had re-empowered for her. The defensive spell would shield them from some of the physical damage, and she hoped it would block the poison aspect of the mustard jelly's attacks entirely.

The mustard she had attacked then struck back, and Jaheira was smashed off of her feet. Luckily, Jaheira's hasty defensive spell kept the Poison and Slow at bay, but the strike still knocked her off of her feet and took a chunk from her health bar.

The two women's sacrifice had allowed Harry to finish concentrating on his spell, and now he thrust his will out into the world in the form of a crescent moon of flame that shot out from his shield. The magical fire struck the mustard jelly fighting Jaheira and it exploded, sending bits and pieces of jelly everywhere including on to Jaheira.

She squawked in slimy outrage, as the enemy wizard shouted. "Damn you! How dare you do that to my jellies! Feed on them my pretties, feet on all three of them!"

At that point, with her immediate enemy trying to reform, Jaheira turned to him, and closed. The man stumbled back, his eyes wide as he realized his danger. He tried to cast the spell, but Jaheira's staff end intersected his hand, causing him to cry out in pain. He was too slow to dodge the next strike either and it nearly laid him out.

Yet at the same time, Harry cried out in pain as a strike from the mustard jelly remaining intact got through his defenses from the side, hitting his sword arm high up in the shoulder. And unlike with Jaheira, her Barkskin spell wasn't able to slow both of the Mustard Jelly's debuffs.

### **You have been Poisoned.**

Viconia had fallen to the ground and rolled nearby, trying to get the slime off of her, and in seeming to do so, the mustard that had been attacking her turned its attention to Harry. But the pain from her poison was still too much for her to concentrate on spell, and so she could do nothing, except race forward shouting out, "I will deal with the mage, you help Harry!"

While she was not feeling very generous towards Harry at the present second thanks to having gotten a face full of slime a moment ago, Jaheira turned away from the rapidly retreating mage, and began to attack the remaining slime from behind. While the hits didn't do any damage, the slime instantly shifted its attention to her, grabbing her arm and staff, trying to melt it away, but the druidic magic within kept this from working.

Harry thrust to his feet and darted forward. Using his magical blade, he sliced into the monster, carving away chunks of it to scatter everywhere around them. The monster warbled in pain, and tried to envelop his arm in turn, but Harry pulled it out, grimacing at the pain of his continuing poison.

Another strike from the mustard jelly sent both of them reeling and this time, the other debuff took hold in Harry. But Jaheira luckily again was able to get her shield up in time to save her face from being directly and continued to not be impacted by the debuffs the mustard jelly dealt.

She felt a rib ago a second later as another strike got through her defenses, and fell backward. Seeing that, Harry grimaced, and once more slashed at the monster with his sword, moving slow slowly he felt as if the slime had enveloped his legs and arms and everything, trying to concentrate through his pain. *Dammit, I need to heal this poison away...*

A second later, a blow from the slime nearly took Harry off his feet, and he realized that the battle was no time to experiment with that kind of thing. Instead, he concentrated on something he could do. He and Imoen had discussed the possibilities of transfiguration coupled with the spells of this world before, and now he conjured a large vial of oil into his hand, which he hurled into the side of the slime.

The mustard jelly caught it, enveloping the thing in itself, and then Harry stepped forward, his blade covered with a magical fire that he had just created, ignoring the pain the spell crafting demanded from him. The mustard jelly retreated, but Harry noticed the other slime was back in one piece, having reformed from his initial flame strike but still horribly weakened. "Jaheira, fall back and heal Viconia! Viconia, some kind of attack spell of that slime, finish it off!"

Jaheira instantly obeyed, moving over to Viconia, who had finished off the mage with a hammer blow to the skull that had shattered his head like an egg. As healing magic from the other woman washed over her, the drow breathed a sigh of relief, and then instantly obeyed Harry's order just as Harry finished his own opponent off.

Turning, Jaheira was in time to see Harry's blade penetrate the vial he had created as it floated within the slime. The oil was instantly ignited by the fire in his sword inside the monster. Slimes, after all, did not have the same properties of water to put out such fires. The fire quickly spread causing the monster to squeal, and then slowly just collapsed in place.

**You have slain Mustard Jelly. 2000 XP.**

**You slain Mustard Jelly 2000 XP.**

**You have slain Narcillicus, Slime Enthusiast, 800 XP.**

These notifications made Harry breathe a sigh of relief. However, that was not the only thing he saw. The monsters around Imoen and his other companions were still there, and his companions hadn't moved all that much, retreating away to the point where one of them had become an arrow again. But it was obvious they were fighting for their lives. And despite his own recent brush with violence and death, Harry wasn't about to let that stand.

"Viconia, heal Jaheira and me but leave at least one medium healing spell and two of your Cure Light Wound. The rest of our party is facing something else out there, and I think we need to take it from behind whatever it is... which means it's time to be sneaky..."

**OOOOOO**

To say that Imoen and the others were not having a good time of was put it mildly. A single ankheg would have been a tough match for their party, with high health points, extremely good durable armor, and both close range and long range acid attacks coupled with raw strength and the ability to borrow through the ground. With five of them ambushing the group, they were having trouble staying alive even though they had gotten lucky and been able to force one to flee early on.

Edwin's summoned monsters fell quickly but they had let the group retreat back out of the rocky plane, which at least let them find cover, although the continued Ankheg attacks had forced them to scatter. The group also had a lot of fire arrows, which Harry had distributed to the others occasionally during the dungeon dive when they took them from kobold commandoes. The fire arrows were hurting the ankheg when they hit but Imoen knew that the spells of the two magic users should have made the bigger difference.

But neither could concentrate on their magic long enough to get off a higher level spell, and Magic Missiles, Agannazar's Scorcher, and Flame Arrow or Acid Arrow were not doing enough damage as they couldn't keep firing at any one ankheg at a time. They had to just pop out from cover and hit whichever ankheg they could. The Ankheg were now moving far slower than at first, and more than one of them showed plates that had been battered by impacts, or burn marks here and there, but the adventurers had to keep getting lucky.

Branwen, who had found her slingstones not doing much of anything, only had a few Cure Light Wound spells left after healing the group of their wounds from the initial ambush. Worse, their cover was disappearing, something Imoen knew as she could hear her own hiding place disappearing under the sizzle of an acid attack.

Nearby, Dynaheir cried out in pain as one of the spitting strikes finally caught her, striking her in the arm as she was too slow to get behind cover. The strike not only splashed acid across her arm, neck and even a bit of her face, but the impact very obviously broke her arm, snapping it at an odd angle and causing the witch to fall on her face. "AAGGGG!!!"

Another similar acid spit nearly caught Edwin who had astonishingly reached out from cover higher up the tiny hill to grab at the wounded Witch. But he dodged just enough to fire off a magic missiles spell, which struck the same animal that had attacked him. "Fall damn you, fall to the sorcerous power of Edwin Odesseiron!!!"

Despite his shouting, Edwin sounded close to breaking. But someone else was also responding to Dynaheir's injury.

"No! You will not have my Witch!" Minsc bellowed. Switching out from the Chelsea Crusher he had been using against one of two Ankheg who had burst out of the ground right in front of him, he raced off with nothing in his hands barely dodging under a blow from it as he raced towards Dynaheir.

As he darted away, this left Khalid and Branwen to face both of the ankheg who had just closed with the party. Grimacing, Imoen darted out of cover, racing between her comrades and closing, using another Lacero spell to both of the ankheg. "Branwen, back away and hit me with a healing spell, and then get Dynaheir back on their feet!"

Thanks to her Fight Like a Jackrabbit, Imoen was able to dodge every strike from the two bug monsters. Her whip lashed out in turn, but only once did she scoring a long burn mark on the side of one of the ankheg, doing little damage. The creature's armor was pretty darn good. second later, one of Branwen's last healing spells washed over her, and Imoen used the renewed help to launch a cutting spell towards one of the beasts. The creature raised one of his arms, intercepting the spell but the cutting spell removed the arm at the weird bug like elbow. It squalled in agony, and yet still was able to strike hard, launching another acid attack towards the distant Dynaheir.

Minsc got there just in time to defend the downed witch, with Branwen on his heels. But the ranger howled in pain as the acid ate into back of his helmet. Tossing it away saved his head, but blinded him to the next strike, which struck him in the back, sending acid splashing everywhere along his back, lower back and thighs. "GARGH!!!!"

"Dammit!" Imoen shouted, bringing her whip around again, this time aiming at one of closer ankheg's eyes. The strike again really didn't harm the monster as much as it should have, although it blinded that eye as Imoen had one of the others earlier. That particular Ankheg looked to be the one that had just sent Edwin skittering into cover.

But this time her strike gave Khalid an opening, which he took instantly. He took a step to the side dodging a wild blow from the wounded beast then darted in, his sword stabbing deep into the monster. Thanks to it's magical properties, his sword was able to punch through the chitin of the



ankheg, but the monster's armor was so thick the sword couldn't penetrate deeply enough to do crippling damage.

Another series of magic missiles flew from Edwin, the beast who previously had him pinned having turned to take Branwen under fire. The Magic Missiles crashed into the beast, finally doing damage as it struck burnt or weakened plates of chitin, blowing several of them off. But it still turned, launching another spit of acid towards Branwen from behind.

The cleric was forced to thrust her shield up to take the blow, and the acid strike began to sizzle and bite into it, causing her to toss the now useless hunk of metal and wood to the side. "Blast it these beasts are overly hard on our equipment!" She had lost two of her warhammers by this point, and all of their shields were gone by now.

"AAGGGH!" Khalid screamed as the monster he had just attacked leaned down and bit his shoulder hard, it's mandibles biting into his plate armor. Although it couldn't quite break through at once, the bite crushed his shoulder and collarbone. The monster then lifted the half-elf off of the ground, shaking him like a dog would a rat as acid filled saliva .

Imoen launched another attack spell at the monster who was biting Khalid.

**You have used the Blood Mage Spell Rifela.**

**This spell creates a magical bullet that then flies at high speeds to penetrate its target.**

**-25 to health.**

The penetrating spell impacting the same point that Khalid's sword had struck earlier, finally causing the animal some real pain. It dropped Khalid, crying out and falling onto its side, shuddering, trying to push himself upright, only to fail. The spell had obviously hit something important inside the beast.

But putting down one of the monsters was but a minor reprieve. Khalid was down, and now as the other monster he and Imoen had been fighting closed on him, the fourth monster caught Branwen with a scythe blow to the side. The hit smashed her to the ground, her armor sizzling, her face disfigured and the woman howling agony from the acid that continually dripped from the ankheg scythes.

Even as her vision began to pulse red and her head started to throb in pain from all of the spells she had used, Imoen tried to close with the last of the monster facing her and Khalid, tried to get the monster's attention even though she knew it was going to be useless.

Suddenly, two healing spells struck the party. One, a Cure Serious Wounds spell, hit Minsc. He had just been smashed to his knees. His back and legs having been hit by a acid strike. But the armor they had found in the gnoll fortress was a Chest Plate +1, and was thus able to take the strike without melting. Now as the spell hit and healed his wounds Minsc, suddenly free of pain, twisted from where he had been hovering over Dynaheir, bringing out his Chelsea Crusher at the same time. "CLEAVE!" He howled.

The head of the the glaive crashed into the monster's side, not penetrating, but dealing crushing damage to it, breaking several of the armors plates, and doing some internal damage as the beast coughed blood with its next exhalation, squalling in pain.

The other healing spells struck Branwen, who rolled away twisting until she had her feet under her, and her magic hammer in hand, coming back up to strike the monster who had just been about to finish her off.

At the same time, Harry appeared.

The three of them had closed using an invisibility spell that Imoen had taught Harry back in Candlekeep. They both agreed Hide in Shadows was better, but since Harry couldn't use that nor could Viconia, this was a good alternative. And just like before, Harry had been able to come up with a spellless alternative to the original, which cost less in terms of health.

As they had come close, Harry had read the bestiary page, making plans.

### Ankheg

**A giant bug monster, this creature uses acid-assisted scythes to cut through the ground like it was loose dirt. This monster usually works together with a nest of up to six adults and numerous young at a time and needs a huge range in order to feed themselves. Their normal prey are... well, anything they can get their scythes on really. They aren't fussy. Nor are they that intelligent, although they have exhibited a very simple kind of pack mentality if working together. Ankheg also have an acid spit attack, and acid scythe strike will do -20 damage each time they strike dead on.**

**Strengths: physically strong, able to move quickly underground. Their armor is incredibly tough, giving them +15% resistance against most types of damage, including low level magical spells save cold and fire. Slashing and penetrating damage resistance is 30%. While they can be wounded by regular weapons, it will take a long while.**

**Weaknesses: Ankheg cannot see behind themselves and while they have good eyesight, they use vibrations to find their prey, a ability that can be overloaded. They are weak to fire and cold, and their base resistance to magic is only on their chitin, not the rest of their bodies.**

**Attitude towards Adventurers: Mmmm... yummy. A single adventurer can feed an adult Ankheg for a full day. This means your something of a great food source.**

With that information in mind, the three of them had moved to be behind the Ankheg, and now, as Jaheira used her staff's stored spells and Viconia did the same, Harry was in the perfect position to finish off the monster fighting Khalid and Imoen. Even with backstab Harry didn't want to trust his sword to that kind of armor. Instead, he leaped upwards, bringing his hammer down on the top of the monster, smashing his hammer into the back of the head right where the neck began. There were several smaller plates there letting the ankheg move its neck better, and he hoped they were not as thick as the rest of chitinous plats.

This proved to be the case as the back of the monster's neck exploded.

**Harry has used Backstab.**

**Critical hit! -40 to enemy health.**

**Your party has killed an ankheg. X975 experience points.**

Instantly, the monster collapsed, leaving only two of the creatures, both of them wounded. And Edwin had been left alone by the monsters due to Minsc's berserker charge into the ones attacking the back of the group. "Fireball!"

Minsc and Dynaheir were both caught in the back last from the explosion, and stumbled away, wounded but not on fire, as both of the remaining ankheg were. Dynaheir had fallen unconscious by this point thanks to the wound she had taken earlier, and now that the monsters were distracted by being slightly on fire, she turned away from them and raced to her side.

Following Harry's earlier instruction to put the enemy down before seeing to the rest of their party members' wounds, Jaheira added to the ankheg misery by casting the lone attack spell in her staff, the Stinging Flies spell. Similarly Viconia began her own attack spell, while Harry, knowing that he was one of the ones that were still in fighting shape, charged through the others, shouting behind him, "Branwen, Get Dynaheir out of there and then see to Khalid!"

The cleric nodded as Harry closed with the two remaining monsters, while Edwin also fell back towards the rest of the group. A berserk Minsc remained where he was, bellowing in fury as he hacked and slashed with the Chelsea Crusher, its cursed impact to a normal person's speed doing nothing to the mighty Ranger. Now with the magical glaive and his Berserker-assisted strength, he chopped limbs off crushed armor or shattered it entirely with each strike.

As Harry closed, the Rasheman Ranger was in turn struck by another acid assisted blow. This was enough to finally overcome the magic in the chest plate that Harry had given him after the battle with the Gnoll chieftain. Armor collapsed under the strike from the acid, and Minsc screamed, his fellows of fury segueing into a scream of agony as he once more felt the sting of the acid these monsters used so profligately.

Switching out to his magical sword, Harry darted around Minsc, closing with the same monster he had been striking, stabbing his sword into one of the areas where the armor of the ankheg had been smashed clean off. With the armor out of the way, his sword sunk deep into the beast, instantly hitting something vital as it fell backwards, the tension keeping the upper body upright ending instantly. Like Imoen's earlier opponent it was still alive and twitching, but Harry left it there, leaving his sword embedded in the monster for now, trusting in its magical properties to save it from any minor acid damage it might accumulate and worried that removing it might take too long, having felt it get stuck between some ribs.

A second later, his war hammer struck the other monster's wounded arm, hitting directly onto the wound causing it to flinch. The next attack missed and then the spells from Viconia and Edwin arrived, shaving off large amounts of its health points. The magic missiles hit hard, imploding one of the creature's eyes, smashing off both of its antennae, and searing one side of its mouth. Viconia's spell, Flame strike, hit, dropping the monster to the ground in agony.

Harry's hammer crashed into the side of the monster as it reeled under the impact of the spells, and a moment later, Harry saw another opening just like in the last. He took a blow to the side for his

troubles, the beasts strength incredible even now, but in the next moment, a last Acid Arrow from the now healed Dynaheir again struck the monster, finally killing it.

**Your party has killed an ankheg. X975 experience points.**

As it felt aside, Harry quickly moved away, knowing Minsc would not be able to control himself, and not wishing to use a cheering charm or something like that at the moment. Given the number of wounded the party had that would have just put one more weight on the shoulders of their already beleaguered healers.

While he and Minsc had been finishing off the last two of the monsters still fighting, Imoen, Jaheira and Khalid had finished off the monster that had been crippled earlier in the battle, while Viconia began to heal the most wounded. Now it and the one that Minsc had been attacking both died, leaving the battlefield to the adventurers.

**Your party has killed an ankheg. X975 experience points.**

**Your party has killed an ankheg. X975 experience points.**

That meant that he and the others had gotten a good chunk of experience today, to add to the amount won clearing the dungeon, and Harry was pleased to see it. All that meant he was fully a third to the next level, which would take as much experience as Harry's previous levels. What he was not pleased to see was Khalid, despite his injuries just being healed by her, now threatening Viconia. "Harry, what are you doing traveling with a drow!?"

"What are you doing being almost food monsters? Adventuring takes you and strange direction sometimes," Harry quickly quipped, moving towards them. "Besides, she saw the only reason your wife is on her feet currently, and me too, to be blunt about it. And without that, all of you would be dead right now."

**Charisma Check passed. Your attempt to diffuse the situation with humor and information both has worked on Khalid.**

As Harry saw that message, Khalid lowered his sword to the ground, looking over at his wife. Instead of the effusive hug or snog that would've occurred between a human couple, he simply smiled at her, and spoke in Elvish. His stutter was still apparent, but his eyes now latched onto Jaheira like she was a lodestone.

Jaheira replied in turn in Elvish, even as she began to use shreds made from the cloth of the foes Viconia and Harry had killed to bind some of the wounds that Branwen had taken. Luckily, healing spells cleared out runes as well, so there was no danger of acid still being in the woman's wounds, although the spell hadn't actually closed many of her burns, the spell having concentrated on removing the acid first. If she had been hit with a Serious or even Cure Medium Wounds spell, it would've removed and closed the wounds, but as it was, Branwen, Dynaheir and Minsc would all be walking mummies for a time, while Khalid's arm would need a sling.

Still, Viconia's spells had kept them all in the land of the living. At the moment, after two hard fights, that was all that could be asked. *And Jaheira can add her own healing spells to the pool. We'll all be up and back to normal in a day. Damn, but magic is great.*

**Charisma check passed. Your show of good humor has caused Branwen to push past awkwardness in facing a representative of a nominally evil race.**

For her part, Branwen hesitated at seeing Viconia's face, but now nodded at her, and stood there stoically as Jaheira saw to her wounds, murmuring something that Harry couldn't hear. Jaheira replied in a similar manner, and the priest of Tempus bellowed in laughter.

**Charisma check failed. While still willing to follow your lead, Dynaheir is now questioning your sanity. Luckily for you, she's also so sore and too tired from the fight to do anything beyond question it internally.**

Edwin didn't seem to care one way or the other about Viconia's race, which Harry was happy about, although perhaps he should have seen it coming. And Imoen was looking too out of it to care. Seeing that, Harry moved over to where Imoen it slumped to the ground, staring straight ahead, her eyes closely shut as she tried to leave her breathing. It was very obvious that Imoen had pushed her use of blood magic spells, and Harry used his Lay on Hands spell, restoring some of her health. This proved just enough for her to look up at him and smiled wanly, which probably meant she had pushed her blood magic spells to the point where another spell might well have killed her outright.

"Khalid, you probably know the most about ankheg. Can we stay here safely? I don't think any of us are in a position to travel very far." Harry asked, while in the background Minsc continued to bellow, getting his rage out.

Khalid nodded, still having trouble tearing his eyes away from his wife. "Ankheg groups routinely have a gigantic territory, but there could be as many as twelve or fourteen of them in such a nest. However, there are very rarely more than four or six adults in such a group. And we slew them all. If we head back away down toward where our band came from, we should be able to find a place where we can hold up for the night."

Grimacing at the idea of fighting even immature ankheg as battered as they were, Harry nodded, and looked over at Minsc shouting, "Boo, bite him on the ear. We need to get going."

There was a squeak, barely heard over the continuing sound of Minsc's bellowing cries, as the miniature giant space hamster appeared from underneath the tatters of Minsc's under-clothing. Climbing him like he was a giant tree, the hamster was soon perched on his shoulder, whereupon Boo squeaked a few times, then Minsc hard on the ear.

Just as Harry had hoped, the mental impact that Boo had on Minsc carried over to halting his rampage. The ranger slowly shook his head, then stared down at his shoulder before the Chelsea crusher vanished from his hands, into his item box and he began to put the giant miniature space hamster with two gentle fingers as he looked around him. "Alas, my berserk fury has taken me again. Still, seeing as everyone is still in one piece, Minsc will simply be grateful."

"Let's get moving and find a place where we can rest securely," Harry announced, carrying Imoen over to Jaheira instead of answering Minsc's barely heard murmur. The blonde druid used her staff's last stored healing spell on the girl, letting Imoen regain enough health to at least walk on her own, although her head was still weaving from side to side, and her eyes weren't quite tracking, going from staring all around to being clenched tight in pain.

As the others all nodded, Harry moved from one of the monsters to the other, putting his hand on them. Viconia watched, smiling slightly and shaking her head, while Khalid muttered about cheaters as his touch allowed Harry to simply remove the armor of the monsters into his Item Space. "I am not familiar with these creatures. Is there a reason why you are so intent on using that particular skill on their hide? I presume you are leaving the meat behind despite the fact it looks more edible than the rest."

"Yes." Jaheira answered for Harry. "Chitin like that can be made into an amazingly good suits of armor. Armor light enough to be carried by myself, you and Branwen yet give us the equivalent of full plate mail protection."

Two monsters down, Harry shook his head with a chuckle. "That may be, but in their raw state these ankheg plates heavy. Minsc, Branwen? Do you think you're up to carrying one each?"

"Minsc can carry two, friend Harry! And both Minsc and Boo rejoice at once more being reunited with you!" Minsc said, having finished calling down.

"Excellent and it's good to see the two of you too, Minsc! That'll give four of us some very good armor, and considering what happened to yours during the fight, we're going to need it." The last was said ruefully, as Harry transferred the two ankheg shells to Minsc, before doing the same for each of the other dead bodies, taking one himself and giving Branwen the other. They were all in the same battered condition, but they were all ankheg shells, which meant it was still useable once they returned to Beregost and the smith there.

This process, which should've taken a team of rangers several hours took Harry but minutes, with Khalid grumbling about it under his breath, although not with any heat. Jaheira on the other hand simply chuckled, and whispered something in Elvish causing her husband to start then smile before nodding.

Once the process was done the group moved as quickly as their wounds would allow. Imoen was only able to get along on her own two feet with Branwen helping her, making her the slowest of them. Thankfully, they didn't have to travel far to find a place where they could make a temporary camp. This was a dried up riverbed that wound around a dead tree creating a small ditch, interspersed with a few large boulders. It wouldn't be comfortable, but it would cut down the avenues of attack a monster or person could use to get the drop on them. Which was really all any of them cared about this point.

Soon, all of them were slumping around the area, and Harry had set up a small fire pit at the base of the tree, where he began to cook them a meal, with Viconia helping and Jaheira going around helping the others set up their bedrolls. When a series of wolf steaks began to simmer over the fire, Harry pointed his cooking knife towards Dynaheir, seeing as Imoen was still very out of it. "We all have stories to tell obviously, but why don't you all start first. Then we'll get to talking about Viconia, Jaheira and my little adventure."

**End Chapter**

