

I've never been one to write too much; that's something wizards do, and I'm certainly no wizard. Wizards study for years to learn how to perform even the simplest of magic, but for me... magic just comes naturally. I don't mean to say it's easy for me - it's certainly been far more disastrous than any wizard I've ever heard of - but it's not a studied skill. So when I say I'm not much of a writer, I mean it.

But in my frankly absurd past few days I've come across a book. A genuine Wizard's Spellbook. And I'm excited, because I know it contains some of the secrets of magic that I've been searching for.

It's been tough going, though; even with the advantage of, you know, actually being able to cast spells already and so not learning everything from scratch, I've been staring at this book for what feels like forever (three days? has it only been that long?) with no progress. Just last night, I felt like I'd finally made a breakthrough... but still, nothing in this book is working for me.

Maybe I should start at the beginning? I've heard people with journals like to do that. And I do have a good place to start, what with this whole Barovia thing.

This seems like a good idea: let's start here.

Dear Diary

My name is Kal'Thruum, and I am a sorcerer. Not a cleric, like Kinnacia, or a warlock, or a wizard. My magic comes naturally, wildly, and often unexpectedly. It's always bothered me more than anything that my magic, though I can at least somewhat control it by now, doesn't quite work as I want it to - spells sometimes fizzle out or do the complete wrong thing for me. To that end, I've spent the best part of my life searching for answers: how does magic work? Where does it come from? Why am I the way I am?

I left home early, for a half-elf. A bit early for a human, even. As soon as I discovered my magic, I couldn't hold myself back - I needed to know.

I went off exploring. I can't say I had a destination in mind, or even a plan, but I was confident in my abilities. Not the most intelligent move I've ever made, but then I never claimed to be the smartest or wisest person out there.

It took about a year before my first experience with magic. I'd been living on the streets, living off the charity of strangers. I'd always been pretty good at convincing people to help me out when I needed to, and that saw me through that first year. I was living in Neverwinter at the time, having wandered west from Lorkh. Neverwinter was a lovely town for what I was looking for: the Blacklake district was filled with the rich and guillible and Beggar's Nest had a graveyard which had some propensity for the undead. Zombies, but no one quite knew why they appeared. I had no interest in fighting the zombies, mind, especially back then when I could barely cast a consistent Fire Bolt, but the source of the magic animating them in the first place had me intrigued.

Eventually, I did in fact find this source: an artifact in the graveyard, hidden in one of the crypts, which positively pulsed with necromancy. It was a huge tablet, covering an entire wall of the crypt, and inscribed with the most curious of letters: Tokharic. Before this, I'd had no experience with any languages other than Elvish and, of course, Common, but the wall filled me with so much excitement. Here it was! Real magic, secrets that no one had seen in years, written in a foreign language as old as time itself.

Once I'd identified the language, I searched for a way of learning it. Eventually, I came across an elderly elf by the name of Meldanen - he took great pleasure in seeing the tricks that I could accomplish with a simple Prestidigitatation and clearly had more money than sense. But, he could speak the language of dragons, and gladly passed on the knowledge in exchange for a simple fireworks show here and there. The poor fool didn't know nor care that the tricks cost me nothing, and were the simplest trick of all - something which greatly benefitted me, since they were about the only spell I could safely cast without danger.

After far too much study, I could finally understand and speak the language of dragons. I returned to the crypt, eager to understand its mysteries... and was disappointed to find nothing of interest. The writing seemed to be nothing more than an explanation of why the artifact was there - apparently, in years past, an archeologist was exploring the crypts having been convinced there was someone of importance who'd been buried there, forgotten. Worried about being interrupted by the townsfolk, he designed this artifact to scare them away. Conveniently, there was an explanation as to how to disable the effect: I'd always planned to return to the city at some point to convince some rich fool to pay me to turn it off. With our sudden departure of the Forgotten Realms, this may never happen... but I'm hopeful.

The method, by the way, is to chant in front of the tablet: *Si relgr acht wer vers di wer darastrix ekess sulta wer chikohk di tisultair timarfedelom.*

Disheartened, I searched for anything else in the crypt that could sate my hunger for knowledge. I am glad my search got so frantic, since in my frenzy I broke through the coffin next to the tablet. Inside was, not a dead body as I would have expected, but a diary in a language I could not recognize. The only part of the diary I've been able to identify is a marking on the back page: it is the same as a marking on the tablet that I consider the author's signature. My conclusion, then, is that this diary is some journal written by the original archeologist.

I returned again to the city proper to find anyone who would recognize the language, but was met with nothing but blank stares. Eventually, I will decipher the diary... but I suppose I have more important things on my plate for now.

Frustrated with my lack of progress, I decided to search for magic elsewhere. My destination this time was the Neverwinter Woods, which I had been informed held some mysteries: strangers visiting Neverwinter had told stories for years of shapeshifters (obviously druids), tricksters (clearly Faer), and ghosts (not sure about this one). I'd of course been warned away from Faer by father, but then, my mother never seemed so afraid, and I always took after her more than him. They, I knew, held some of the secrets of magic, being so closely tied to it themselves.

I bartered an Adventurer's Pack out of a merchant in the City Core in exchange for a few days of help around the shop and set out. I even convinced him to donate a few simple daggers to my cause, since I was "so frail and unable to protect myself from the ghosts".

The forest was different than I'd expected. I never did manage to find the Faer, but I did find something better: the trees themselves were magical, able to think and speak just like you or I. They have their own language, even: Sylvanic, which I eventually picked up to understand what the trees knew about the magic of the forest. To summarize: not much. Trees can speak, sure, but they don't think the same way as we do, they can be hardly made to care for the whims of a half-elf. In fact, they don't really provide much value at all: why do they need a language if they never really say anything?

God damn trees.

They did direct me to a Fae camp, though it wasn't quite intentional on their part. The Fae don't interfere with the trees like men do, but they make enough of an impact that it... let's say it comes up in conversation among trees.

Fae are weird creatures. Flighty, vain, nearly as hard to speak with as trees. They speak the same language, for the most part, depending on which Fae they are. Sylvan, Common... some of them even speak Elvish. They seemed to take delight in tricking me, casting their illusions to fool me into believing the patently absurd. My willingness to go along with their jokes and my ability to speak their languages somewhat enamoured them of me, though, and I certainly learned some of what I set out to accomplish. They gifted upon me an arcane focus made of a glowing crystal, one of my proudest possessions. They informed me of its dual uses: doubling for the physical components of any more complicated spell and increasing my virulence. I'm not convinced of the latter, but the former has certainly been proven time and time again.

My ability to cast Dancing Lights was never something I understood: it seemed to be tied to nothing in particular and would sometimes work and sometimes have no effect with no readily apparent reason. It turns out, though, the reason was the proximity of wychwood; somehow, I can summon all the arcane energy necessary to create these lights - but only by consuming the energy of nearby wychwood. My previous "random" abilities, then, were based on my proximity to wychwood, something I'd never even considered could affect the magic.

With the focus, though, I can cast Dancing Light with certainty. The feeling upon realizing I had gained some modicum of control over my powers... it was a good feeling.

I stayed with the Fae for a while. It felt like a couple years, but I know the Fae have a way of tricking time itself into disobeying the whims of the real world. For all I know, hundreds of years have passed since I first entered that forest. Events have contrived themselves to prevent me from returning to anywhere I'd been before... well, you'll see. I can't say I care too much, after all, I don't seem to be suffering any ill effects.

Wow, I've certainly rambled for longer than I expected. I wrote earlier that I had a beginning in mind... well, I haven't gotten to that part yet. That happened a few days after leaving the Fae, about five days ago now.

How My Story Really Begins

After leaving the Fae, I wandered through the forest a bit more. My rough plan was to return to Neverwinter to figure out how long I'd been with the Fae and to get some more supplies before setting out to... somewhere. I certainly didn't have a location in mind.

Along the way, I ran into Scathac.

Scathac was an interesting elf. She called herself a monk, but I'd never heard of a monk anything like her. She had a massive hero complex, and she was anything but calm and sedate (you know, the way monks should be). She was always willing to rush into danger without thought for her personal safety... which was convenient, given I met her as I was being set upon by bandits.

The bandit thing was completely my fault: I'd been wandering with my head in the clouds, thinking of future plans and not looking where I was going. I've learned to be a bit better with that, given this country is clearly out to kill me, but back then (still only five days ago? I can hardly believe that) I had some problems.

Anyway, these bandits jumped out at me as I walked along a small, twisting path through the woods. They noticed the crystal in my hand and the full pack on my back, I assume, since they demanded I hand them over. I'd only barely shaken myself enough to focus on the present when a blur ran out from the trees to punch one of the bandits straight in the face.

I remember looking at the bandits, them looking back at me, all of us with confusion on our faces. Scathac yelled, breaking the confusion, and the bandits scattered.

Turns out, Scathac had been apprenticing under some recluse somewhere, since she was "destined to be a hero". She was clearly delusional, but I can't deny her hero complex was useful in saving me, not to mention in helping us survive the murder house. ... I'll get to that later.

We decided to travel together for a while - her, searching for adventure, me, searching for magic. We continued heading toward Neverwinter, since it was pretty easy to convince her that adventure lay that way. Having someone watching my back... it was nice.

That day was clearly one for meeting new people; we ran into two other travellers within hardly a few hours: a druid who seemed intent on bringing what I was mostly sure was a dead body to the nearest city and a ranger who didn't seem to have a real reason for being in the woods in the first place, but seemed content enough to be our eyes and ears. I was happy enough with the arrangement: I no longer needed to distract myself watching for bandits and could instead focus on working out my upcoming plans.

Elwing, the druid, is an odd character. He seems to be motivated mostly to find animals... I have no idea why, but he often asks people where he might be able to find some new animal he'd never seen before. Eh, druids, what can I say? He seems like a pretty "good" elfling, and he can't lie to save his life (as well as I can tell, which is pretty well), so it's pretty easy to figure out how he thinks. He gets a bit distracted by "doing the right thing", but so far me and Emmeral have been able to convince him to avoid that (for the most part).

What do I say about Emmeral? He's a ranger, and a damn good one at that. I've seen him slice through multiple monsters in a single swing and be at the front lines taking down groups of our enemies. He can't really take a hit, but he's pretty great at killing before that becomes a problem. I would not want to be on his bad side, that's for sure. We've been scheming together lately: he wants to leave our group and I'd be inclined to go with him. The fact that he's talking with me makes me pretty confident I'll be on the right side if he ever does decide to go through with that.

Anyway, the four of us were travelling along for a while when we came across a couple dead horses and a broken down wagon. Once Emmeral nudged me and I noticed the scene, I figured it had been picked clean by the bandits that came across us earlier.

Turns out that assumption was incredibly wrong.

Emmeral went ahead and investigated the scene a bit - and that's about where our adventure began.

Turns out there were Goblins about, Goblins who were still watching the scene in case any dumb fools like us came across it. They ambushed us and tried to kill us, as Goblins do. Emmeral though... Emmeral was terrifying. He killed almost all of them, though one got away with a missing ear. I'm proud to say I helped: I threw a bunch of Fire Bolts at them, enough to hurt at least two of them.

This is where Scathac's hero complex came into play: she managed to convince us that the Goblins probably had at least one prisoner, from the whole wagon and dead horses thing, and that we, as good, law-abiding citizens, should go to their aid. I was inclined to argue against her, but she

made a good point about Goblins often keeping treasure in their caves - some of which may be magical.

We set out to follow them.

Turns out Emmeral is also pretty good at tracking down prey. He led us right to the Goblins' cave, though he seemed to have tried to off Scathac by dodging a trap and not telling her about it along our way. It was pretty funny to see her strung up from her foot, and even more so when Elwing tossed a dagger at the rope to get her down... from twenty feet above the path. Where she was hanging upside-down. Needless to say, she was not amused. She seemed mostly fine, though, so I was pretty amused.

The cave had a stream leading into it and a blind on the opposite side of the stream. We waded across the stream fine, but had to fight a few more Goblins hiding in the blind. They were, apparently, guarding the entrance, but they weren't quite aware enough to not be taken by surprise.

The cave, on the other hand, was less easy to manage.

We made our way in along the stream-side for only a few feet before a cavern opened to our right. Inside were three snarling wolves. I have no idea why Elwing insisted we should ignore them and continue moving on, but that's what we did. Further along, the path curved with a sort of landing across the stream on the other side. Just as we were approaching this, the stream quadrupled in size, a massive burst of water rushing for us. Scathac, I think, made the jump across to the landing, but the rest of us were swept away. It only took us barely out of the cave, but it certainly hurt - both our bodies and our self-esteem.

The dead body Elwing had been carrying over his shoulder was confirmed dead this time, which at least means we didn't have to continue worrying about that. He didn't seem to torn up about it.

We tried to make our way back to the landing to meet with Scathac, but another burst of water scared us off. We jumped into the room with the wolves, and I was convinced we were done for, but Elwing managed to calm down the wolves enough so they didn't attack us. That was when I realized he could be useful after all, in the right circumstances. Scathac eventually re-joined us, since we realized there was a sort-of chimney chute in the back of the room that led deeper into the cave.

We climbed up the shoot (I need to get better at this, by the way, falling down due to lack of grip strength is not a good feeling) and surveyed the new area: it seemed to be a mix of store-room and waiting-room. There were a few Goblins in there, a tamed wolf, and a Bugbear.

I'd never seen a Bugbear before then; they are terrifying. Massive and muscular, it looked like it could rip me in half without breaking a sweat. I decided to be clever, though, and used Prestidigitatio to distract the Bugbear into leaving the room. A Sending convinced him that the Goblins were talking about him behind his back.

Well, sort of. It convinced him at first, which made him angry at the Goblins, which at least distracted them all enough to give us a bit of an advantage.

Our group took them by surprise and made short work of them. We managed to kill them all before any of them could run out an alert other Goblins, which I consider a win in our books. A well-timed Fire Bolt from me finished off the Bugbear. Unfortunately, nothing in the store-room held any value to us, nor was there any prisoners, so the monk had us continue onwards. She was insistent, that way.

We walked through the caves pretty slowly, after that, since we realized the benefit of surprising any Goblins that might want to attack us. We also started insisting Emmeral stay at the front of the group, for our own safety. That was pretty convenient for me, especially, since I didn't have to worry about getting attacked while I rained down hellfire on our enemies.

Or, well, something like that. Maybe "hellfire" is too strong of a word for it... but I digress.

The back of the cave was a large room, filled with a dozen Goblins. They were sitting around a campfire, screeching at each other in their awful language, with one of the Goblins repeatedly gesturing to his ripped off ear.

That was a bad sign, I know.

One of the Goblins sat on his own, on an out-cropping at the back of the room, overlooking the rest. A Dwarf was bound next to him, clearly unconscious. This, of course, was enough to make Scathac abandon all sense of surprise. She shouted at the head Goblin to let his prisoner go, which immediately alerted all of the Goblins that four adventures soaked in the blood of their brethren were trespassing in their cave.

Stupid heroes.

The Goblins around the fire stood and drew their weapons, the one on the outcropping held the Dwarf off of the ledge. He yelled at us in Common, asking what we wanted.

At this point, of course, the others were less sure about the whole yelling and alerting Goblins thing. I got elected our spokesman, which seems to continue to be a trend. Given how the conversation turned out, I'm a bit surprised the goody two-shoes of our group are alright with that but... well, I certainly don't mind.

I tried to convince the Goblin to give us the Dwarf, but we didn't really have anything to barter with. The Goblins seemed to be in fear of that Bugbear I killed earlier, though, so that gave me something to negotiate with: the head of the Bugbear in exchange for freeing the Dwarf. We were all set to make the trade when the conversation turned sour: the Goblin wanted more from us, a payment or something like that, and I was not willing in the slightest to actually lose anything to save this potentially dead, dying, or useless Dwarf. The Goblin said he'd drop the Dwarf if I didn't pay up and I dared him to follow through.

He did. The Dwarf probably wasn't too pleased by that, and Scathac and Elwing certainly weren't, but whatever. We ended up saving the Dwarf, so it all worked out fine.

The other Goblins launched at us, well, they attacked us - some with swords and some with bows. The earless one especially came at us like a demon possessed. Emmeral put him down easily. Between the swords, fists, and magic of our little band of adventurers, the Goblins went down fast. Fast enough for Scathac to rush over and save the Dwarf before she died to her injuries. And the whole being dropped of a ledge thing.

Most interestingly, my magic did some things it had never done before: at one point, I launched a bunch of Magic Missiles at the Goblins hitting three of them in a single spell. I certainly wasn't expecting it, but it was something new and exciting that I knew I needed to figure out how to repeat. My magic has been doing that a lot, lately; I feel like I've been getting stronger over these past few days, learning how to do magic that years of exploring never taught me. The other have reported similar happenings, so it's not unique to me. Something about killing enemies and accomplishing our goals... it gives us all a lot of chances to practice our abilities.

Anyway, with the Goblins defeated, we trudged our way out of the cave, lugging the unconscious Dwarf with us. Elwing freed the wolves on our way out, which took absolutely none of us by surprise. We slept in the blind that night, since it was pretty much nightfall by the time we got out. I stayed up a bit thinking about my new magic, trying to remember the feeling of casting that spell so I might do it again, but eventually I fell into my trance as well.

That turned out to be a big mistake; we'd never even considered sleeping in shifts, which I'm kicking myself now for not suggesting.

The Damned Murder House

We awoke somewhere completely different. The country of Barovia, it turns out, which I don't recall ever hearing about. None of the others claim to have any idea how we got here, or where here is, and I'm inclined to believe them: the more time we spend in Barovia, the more I realize no one would ever come here of their own free will.

We were in a forest, like when we'd fallen asleep, but all the trees were... different, somehow. Ominous. Quiet. None of them spoke, or at least they didn't respond when I asked them where we were. A frustrated Fire Bolt thrown at them got swallowed by the fog before even reaching a tree.

Did I mention the fog? Or, as I consider it in my head, the Fog. Capitalized. Something about the Fog urged us forwards, urged us toward a small town that was utterly abandoned, as far as we could tell. It turns out this town was also named Barovia, though it didn't seem nearly big nor important enough to be named after the entire country. Or vice-versa, we never did ask about that.

The Fog urged us toward a decrepit house. Everything here was run-down, but this was the worst of them all: the entire house had a feeling of despair, of something evil we couldn't put our fingers on. Two children stood outside it, but something about them, as well, was... off.

The children convinced us to enter the house, to slay the "monster downstairs" and save their baby brother upstairs. Scathac, everyone's favourite hero, took up the quest to save them immediately. The rest of us were less convinced, but the Fog did a good job of ushering us inside. The inside of the house was surprising to me: nothing seemed out of place at first, everything was well-maintained, at least on the first few floors. Not that we spent much time looking around; with there being a baby trapped upstairs our noble hero charged up the staircase with nary a thought of proceeding with caution.

Ugh.

The rest of us followed, having to hurry just to keep her in our sights. Once we reached the third floor, that was when we found the first hints of something being out-of-place.

Everything was - very suddenly - dirty, decrepit, and broken down, like the rest of the town. And everything was angry.

First, a set of armor animated itself and attacked us just as we'd reached the third floor landing. That was a brutal fight, Emmeral had a sword torn out of his hand and Scathac nearly broke her hand punching the suit of iron. We destroyed it enough to prevent it from hitting us eventually, but it certainly took a huge amount of effort on all our parts.

Then, what a nightmare, we came across a ghost, a vengeful spirit that attacked us as we entered the baby's nursery. It didn't seem to want to leave the room we found it in, which could have been an easy way to avoid fighting it, but no, Emmeral just had to kill the thing. Again. Gah, I was practically fighting against him the whole time: every time he opened the door to attack the thing, I immediately slammed the door shut with Mage Hand. If we'd have coordinated, it might have actually been a good strategy: close the door before the ghost has the time to counter-attack him. As it was, we just got in each other's way and pissed each other off.

Eventually, he actually managed to kill (re-kill?) it. At this point we confirmed what we already suspected: there was no baby in the nursery, the children had lied to us. In the mean time, the other three (did I mention Kinnacia yet? the Dwarf cleric we'd saved from the Goblins, the most stereotypically good person in our party, who keeps stopping the group to check if she recognizes any of the religious symbology around here - spoiler: she hasn't yet) somehow ended up fighting a broom.

Yes, a broom. And, honestly, I'm pretty sure Kinnacia was losing.

Emmeral and I entered the hallway to see this and just stopped, unable to believe our eyes. It was... one of the more hilarious things I'd ever seen. We ended up rolling our eyes and going to explore the master bedroom; I didn't find anything and Emmeral only found an empty jewelry box. The box itself was worth some gold, at least, so it wasn't completely worthless.

Eventually, we convinced the others to leave the broom behind and continue exploring the house. We started noticing a bunch more oddities; skulls subtly stitched into curtains, oddly decaying papers, and things like that. This house was getting creepier by the minute.

Emmeral and I ended up exploring a study while the others explored a music room. This ended up being... pretty fortunate for me. I found a secret passageway in the back of a bookshelf which led to a half-opened chest with an adventurer laying dead over top of it, a letter clutched in one hand.

After carefully checking the area for further traps, I read the letter:

My most pathetic servant,

I am not a messiah sent to you by the Dark Powers of this land. I have not come to lead you on a path to immortality. However many souls you have bled on your hidden altar, however many visitors you have tortured in your dungeon, know that you are not the ones who brought me to this beautiful land. You are but worms writhing in my earth.

You say that you are cursed, your fortunes spent. You abandoned love for madness, took solace in the bosom of another woman, and sired a stillborn son. Cursed by darkness? Of that I have no doubt. Save you from your wretchedness? I think not. I much prefer you as you are.

Your dread lord and master, Strahd van Zarovich

That answered a lot: the house contained some hidden sacrificial altar, the ghost that attacked us was probably the woman this "pathetic servant" cheated with, and the son that we went to save was never even born to begin with. That said, it also raised some questions. Strahd van Zarovich? Who was Strahd?

Now isn't that an interesting question. I learned a lot more about Strahd eventually, but I'll

continue in order for now.

Within the chest was three scrolls containing one-time use spells, deeds to the house and a windmill, a will stating those deeds should pass to the children we met outside, and the blank books which I am currently writing in. All of these aged immensely upon leaving the house, but they're still mostly intact.

I decided to keep the deeds a secret from the others. The fact that this Durst family had some magical scrolls, books about rituals everywhere, and something weird and magical going on... there may be some interesting things to find in that windmill, and now it's mine. At some point, I'll need to go investigate.

I emerged from the secret room to find Emmeral rummaging through the desk in the study proper. He found an iron key, but nothing else of value. I urged him out of the room to share the secrets I'd found once we were within earshot of the others. When his back was turned, I grabbed the wax stamp of the Durst family in case I needed to forge some papers to prove my ownership of the windmill.

Once we'd met the others in the second floor hallway, I shared the letter with them. I also told them about the scrolls (which they so graciously let me keep to myself, as our only mage) and the blank books. Mostly, they were interested in the letter. None of them seemed to make the connection to there being a hidden altar in this house (proved later when everyone was surprised), nor about the affair being the ghost we killed (though they realized that later). The baby was immediately remarked upon, but no one seemed to care who this Strahd person was. The general consensus was that Strahd was the god that this servant worshipped.

I find it interesting to note that none of them made the same connections I did. Even our cleric, who is self-professed to be an expert in religion, made no comment about Strahd not being the name of a god she'd ever heard of. I'll be keeping in mind the fact that she is less proficient here than she claims. Otherwise, their responses make sense: the monk and the druid don't seem particularly insightful and Emmeral always plays his cards close to his chest. By now, at least, I'm sure he's made the connections.

One thing that stuck out to me was how incredibly certain Kinnacia was that both me and Emmeral were lying about something. I, of course, was pretending I had not found the deeds, but there was no way she should have been able to guess that. Even after she asked me directly and I lied in return, she seemed suspicious; but I'm confident I am a better liar than she is insightful into this. I need to watch this further, she seems to have some sort of supernatural insight into when Emmeral or I lie to her. I've seen other people lie to her, though, and she hasn't picked up on it. Something about this isn't right.

After this, we went downstairs to investigate the other floor we'd rushed past in our hurry to save the never-born child. Not much of interest here: a kitchen, which let us stock up on rations (which spoiled as we left the house), and a den containing some weapons. I got myself a fancy crossbow and some ammunition. I'm not sure when I'd ever need that over my spells, but it doesn't hurt to be prepared.

This is about the time we decided to leave the house. We'd been attacked three times, now, we'd seen the letter warning us of even more danger to come, and the children had lied to us as to there being a heroic reason for us to be there anyway. We went to leave through the main door we'd entered through, and found it missing.

Yes, missing. The door was now a wall.

We got a bit frantic after that, I'll admit. We raced through the house, re-examining every room we'd been through. We tore aside curtains over windows, tried to open doors to the upper floor balconies, but everywhere we had previously been able to see outside was replaced with a plain brick wall. In our frenzy, I'm confident we left no room unturned. It was only after we'd examined every possible exit and come up empty that we reconvened to discuss our next move.

We decided to continue searching the house, looking for the entrance to the basement. We hadn't found it yet, so we knew it was hidden, but we didn't yet know where.

Again, we examined every single room. Eventually, we found a secret passage behind a mirror in the nursery. It led upward, though, which certainly wasn't what we were looking for. Nonetheless, we trudged up the stairs, my Dancing Lights leading the way. There was a locked door at the top of these stairs, but the key Emmeral had grabbed from the study unlocked it. Note to self: next time we do something like this (if, Labelas forbid, we do this again), make sure to continue looking the whole area as we go.

The attic itself contained several rooms, but the most interesting was the children's room. Two skeletons, of roughly the same size, shape, and age as the children we'd met outside (hint, hint) held each other in the centre of the room. This is about when Scathac and Kinnacia realized the children weren't real. Fast them sat a dollhouse which seemed to be a perfect replica of the house. I moved to investigate this, but was taken aback by ghosts of the children appearing as I touched the playhouse.

The ghosts didn't seem to realize they were ghosts. They acted as they would have in life as young children; they were scared and afraid and didn't want to be left alone again. I convinced them to tell us how to get to the basement (secret staircase in a nearby room) and that we'd go kill the monster in the basement and then come back for them (yeah, right), but they got angry as we attempted to leave. As we left the room, the ghosts got so angry they launched themselves at Emmeral and I.

Let me tell you, it's not fun being possessed. The girl ghost possessed me and I could feel her influence upon me for far too long. She was bossy, far more than I was, and that pushed me to insist I lead the group, I walk through doors first, and everyone obey me. It annoys me that none of them seemed to notice how out of character this was for me, since I'm hardly the first person to put myself into danger.

By comparison, Emmeral, who'd been at the front of the group for the most part, had a similar experience being possessed by the boy ghost; he became a mooney, sad shadow of himself that I had to bully into doing anything. Which I enjoyed, since the sister clearly enjoyed leading her brother around.

Nightmare.

I led the group into the room with the secret passage and forced Emmeral to look around; the room was filled with furniture covered by old cloths which I had the others uncover and investigate. A chest sat along one wall, which Scathac discovered contained a bundle of blood and bones - that of the nursemaid. We shrugged and left down the staircase to the basement.

It didn't occur to me at the time, but writing this now... we were certainly callous to the idea of there being a woman's blood and bones in our very hands. This whole adventuring business is certainly making me less squeamish - this isn't necessarily a bad thing, but that certainly didn't take long.

The Damned Murder House's Damned Murder Basement

The moment we entered the basement, chanting filled the air. We couldn't make out the words, or even where it was coming from, but it continued throughout our entire time exploring the place. It was certainly a huge relief when the chanting stopped (much later).

Around the entrance to the basement was a set of crypts. Four of them (one for each family member) were sealed, and a fifth for the dead baby was unsealed and unoccupied. The sixth was more terrifying: it appeared as if someone had broken out of it, shoving the heavy stone slab out of the way as it left. We kept a close eye out for undead after this.

Past the crypts was a dining hall covered in gnawed upon bones. The family, then, was clearly cannibalistic, eating those poor folks that they sacrificed on their hidden altar. Elwing rushed into this room, impatient at our slow progress, and nearly died for it; a monster hid in a darkened alcove and bit his face almost immediately. Together, the rest of us managed to take it down, my magic this time manifesting as a Witch Bolt.

The others helped Elwing get back onto his feet while I pondered the new spell; shooting lightning out of my fingertips was awesome, and it certainly fried the creature to a crisp. That said, I'd meant to shoot Magic Missiles at the beast... I'm still not sure why, but the new spells I've learned since adventuring around have all developed as I attempted to cast something similar, but with the new spell having a greater effect. This is worth investigating; it's as if my magic is responding to my need for certain spells to be added to my repertoire. This is something I'll consider tonight, it would certainly be nice to have some way of ceasing the incessant howling keeping Morriana awake and annoying the rest of us. Maybe something to hold them back? Or to ward an area, keeping everything away? Hmm... I'll think more on this and explain later.

After reviving Elwing and telling him off for running ahead, we continued along - a bit more cautiously, this time. We eventually came across a room containing a tall statue holding a crystalline orb. This... may have excited me more than it should. In retrospect my actions were idiotic, but at the time... the orb looked magical to me and thoughts of safety left my mind as I raced to examine it. Immediately upon touching the orb, though, ghosts appeared all around me and immediately attacked.

I was out in a second, unconscious from their attacks. When I was revived by the others, the ghosts were gone and a hole had appeared in one of the walls. Elwing had apparently cast a single spell that destroyed them all as well as the wall. At the time I wasn't sure how much of that was hyperbole and simply resolved to watch him further. Now, I know it was not: some of his abilities are incredibly potent, he's just not the best at using them at the right time.

Hmm, I should work on directing him more carefully. Maybe if I can convince him to listen to my orders in battle, we can use his abilities more effectively.

I was incredibly sad to notice the orb was missing. Scathac looked me straight in the face and explained that it had shattered during the fight. That lying nadorhuan just wanted to keep it from me; it turned out that Elwing had taken the orb before reviving me. Between the three of them, Elwing, Scathac, and Kinnacia had certainly been aligning themselves against me. Emerald's current plan to abandon them is seeming like a better and better idea as I continue to recount this.

Anyway, at the time I had no idea about the orb and continued along a bit sadly, but otherwise as if nothing had happened. I was still possessed here and dictated our next steps of heading out a certain passage. This passage led to a bedroom, which contained yet another set of surprises.

In the bedroom, we found some miscellaneous useless items like torches, a lantern, armor, and such. Our cleric was happy to see this, since she still had very little equipment after her run-in with Goblins, but the other items were much more interesting: a magical cloak which I was held back from touching given the... incident... in the previous room (which Elwing took - the cloak seems to help protect him from enemies, I would love to get my hands on that), some potions of healing (I pocketed two and gave the other two to some more injured party members, who guaffed them immediately), some thieves' tools (Emmeral took these, the rest of us probably would have broken them anyway), and - most importantly - a Wizard's Spellbook.

Yes, the spellbook I mentioned earlier. The one I'm currently tearing my hair out attempting to decipher. The one that's been on my mind since I first laid eyes on it. That spellbook.

With some trepidation from our resident lying hero, I convinced the group to let me have the book. That was a huge victory - worth losing the chance of getting the cloak over. What's one magic item compared to the chance of learning more about manipulating the very fabric of magic itself?

Unfortunately, picking up these items spawned a trap in the room; two ghouls burst out of the walls to attack us. As an aside, these were clearly the parents of the Durst family.

It was during this point that Elwing finally revealed his true abilities. In front of our very eyes, he leaped at one of the ghouls and turned into a bear before he'd even landed. It was amazing; I'd heard of shapeshifters, of course, and I knew that druids often could do this. But I'd never seen it done in real-life and I'd always thought it was only the most powerful of druids that could do this. Fortunately, he's not much smarter than the average bear, so Emmeral and I should have no problems taking him off-guard if need be.

Where did we go after this room? I remember we were set upon by ghouls along the hallways of the dungeon at some point, but nothing interesting was involved in that fight. I'm pretty sure that was when I needed to intimidate Emmeral into fighting alongside us, his possession having prevented him from being his usual self.

I'm incredibly glad I did this, since it saved my own life later. In attempting to intimidate him, I actually managed to terrify the possessing spirit out of him; with that, he was no longer possessed. He didn't explain to anyone about his possession, though, so I believe he didn't realize why he had been so afraid. Either way, he was "cured" now, and could continue his role of slaughtering our enemies and walking in front of us to search for traps.

At some point, we also came across a set of small bedrooms all nestled together. Each of these bedrooms contained something worthwhile; most of them contained gold or items worth some small amounts of gold, but we also came across a silvered shortsword, which Emmeral took since he was really the only one of us that could properly use it. He left his previous shortsword behind, which, at the time, seemed completely normal, but in retrospect was utterly idiotic. Why leave behind a perfectly good sword? I blame my possession for the fact that I didn't comment on this.

It was around this time that we started to make out the direction the chanting was coming from. Following our ears, we made our way deeper into the crypt.

At this point, I should mention that Kinnacia got attacked by a door which she stuck her ear against to listen past; the door ended up being a mimic which held fast to her ear and attempted to hit her. Seeing a door attached to her ear attempting to hurt her... I must admit, I was laughing too hard to help her defeat it.

This mimic guarded the entrance to the final areas of this dungeon. This final level contained only two areas of note: a set of jail cells and a ritual room, a heavy portcullis locking it away.

Fortunately, we had with us all the finesse that is a bear.

Elwing, the bear, simply lifted the portcullis, throwing it upwards with such force that it actually broke. That was certainly convenient, as I'm not sure there was any other way into the room.

This room was the source of the chanting. We were confident of this, but somehow it fell completely silent as we entered. This scared us all enough that we explored the room incredibly cautiously, not even stepping on the central dias at first.

The room was swamped, with deep water throughout the room. A central dias sat in the centre, and a ledge around the outer wall allowed us to walk through it. At the back of the room, a heap of (what we thought was...) dirt and garbage sat in an alcove. We explored this cautiously, but eventually Scathac jumped onto the central dias. Immediately, cloaked figures appeared all around the ledge and began their chanting again, this time proclaiming "One must die".

Kinnacia shot an arrow at one of the figures, but it simply passed through, as if the figure wasn't even there.

This scared the ever-loving Hel out of us and we tore out of the room. All of us save Scathac, that is; as soon as she attempted to leave the dias, the refuse pile at the back of the room woke up and attacked her.

She fought it valiantly, but it ate her before any of us could return to fight against it. Fight against it we did, though, and we eventually killed it, though not before Elwing had come a hair's-breadth from death. With the creature's death, the chanting stopped and the cloaked figures vanished. The house had been cleansed of its evil.

We took some time to mourn our lost party member, though I admit I believe her death was for the best in retrospect. Between her actively working against me and her propensity to lead us blindly into danger, our lives our safer without her. Her death also gave Kinnacia a chance to loot her body for the adventuring supplies she'd been missing. This was... surprisingly cold for a "good" cleric, but then, I've said before that something about her is not what it seems. I took Scathac's rope; you can never have enough rope.

Battered and bruised, we made our way back through the dungeon. And this is where I realized the other aspect of my possession: my ghost did not want me to leave the house.

I convinced the party to stay in the beds downstairs a night, to rest up before escaping the house. They listened to me, content to obey my wishes, while I silently tried to figure out how to escape my possession. I did not sleep well that night.

In the morning, we continued out of the basement. The house had turned against us; poison spread through every room and the doors had been replaced by swinging blades. We hardly made it out alive, but a combination of quick reflexes and determining the pattern of the swinging blades helped us through.

Just as we neared the final door, though, my possession tugged harshly on me and I couldn't leave the house. I managed to make it obvious enough as to my predicament though, telling the others that I felt like this house was safe and worth staying in. It was just obvious enough, I think,

that Emmeral finally realized what was going on. He yelled at me for a while, trying to scare out the ghost.

I've seen him kill with very little effort, slicing multiple monsters apart with a single swing of his sword. By rights I should be terrified of him, but somehow... he's just not a very intimidating person. It took him far too long to finally intimidate the ghost out of me. Though I'm thankful he did so, since it let me finally (finally!) escape the house, I need to remember to never let him try to intimidate someone we need terrified. Useless.

Barovia

With that, we stumbled into the light of Barovia - the town, not the country.

Well, I say the light, but - though the fog was gone - the gloom covering the sky prevented any real sunlight from reaching through to us. It was... brighter than nighttime, but not by much. This seems to be a trend in Barovia - the country, not the town - days later, and we've still yet to see the sun. A massive castle peered over a hill to the north, only barely illuminated by the lack of sun. We would discover later, that the castle was Strahd's home.

We wandered around until we found a merchant near what we assumed was city centre. Emmeral bought some new armor, and didn't seem overly perturbed that the price was ten times as much as it would be anywhere else. He also kept asking about any expensive items the merchant may have had behind the counter. My assumption is Emmeral is richer than he's been letting on.

He did try to haggle a bit, though, but the merchant just called out his son (nephew?), a giant of a man that he used to strong-arm us into paying the normal fee. Emmeral quickly folded here, which makes sense; if someone is willing to threaten you that blatantly, they obviously won't appreciate any more haggling.

We asked the merchant if he had any maps, but he said he didn't. He gave us a vague description of the area, though, that I can basically summarize as: Barovia (town) is in the east part of Barovia (country). So incredibly useful, I know. I'm hopeful we'll be able to find a map tomorrow in Vallaki (I'll get to that later).

The merchant also directed us to the town bar. It was... not much to look at. Dirty, with the most boring barkeep I've ever come across: when we entered, he listed his wines and their prices in a monotone while wiping a glass with an even dirtier rag. Asking him a question just made him repeat the prices. I still have no idea what was going on with that.

Three colourfully-dressed women in the corner attracted Emmeral's attention, which lifted my spirits a bit: I enjoyed watching him fail to chat with the three women, their cold shoulders were hilarious to see. If I'd have thought they may have had any useful information, I may have joined them, but they didn't seem the brightest sort.

And sitting in the corner was Ismark, the burgomaster's son. We didn't know that at first, but he quickly noticed our ears (looks like elves are a rarity around here, lucky us), surmised we were adventurers, and asked for our help. His sister was being stalked by Strahd (yes, the same Strahd von Zarovich from the murder house), and he needed someone to bring her to safety in Vallaki.

We agree to come with him to talk with Trena (his sister), though we insisted we hadn't yet agreed to take him up on the quest. Even though we ended up agreeing, I must admit I was proud of us

for not rushing into agreeing at the first hint of a request. Clearly, Scathac's unfortunate death left us less likely to act like heroes. I'm very much in favour of this.

As he brought us to his house, Tsmark told us a bit more about the town; that he was the son of the town's burgomaster who had passed away only a few days ago and that the town was... well, not worth spending time in, between Strahd summoning wolves and other monsters and the "March of the Dead", both of which happened every night - we didn't ask about the March, since we arrived at Tsmark's house before we thought to ask. Another thing he mentioned: there's a Vistani camp to the west of Barovia. We've passed it now, but I suspect I know whereabouts it is (north at the fork with the gallows?) in case we need to head back there.

Upon reaching their house (which was in shambles, by the way. The attacks that Tsmark had mentioned were obviously true at first glance, given the entire front yard was torn up), we found out that Irena didn't even want to leave the town. Part of this was that their father had not even been buried yet, but was laying dead in their house; the other was that she somehow liked this town and didn't want to leave, even for her own safety. Something about having grown up here.

We offered to provide protection for them and bring her father to the church for a proper burial, since it's about the only way we can convince her to leave. Even then, Irena barely felt safe enough - this should have been proof enough for me that she was a coward, but I guess I missed the obvious. We carried the father in his makeshift coffin to the church; once there, Emmeral took to digging the grave while I watched over him and the body. The other's went to find the priest in order to perform a ceremony; personally, I thought it would be enough that we had a cleric with us, by Kinnacia felt someone of "the appropriate local faith" should run the ceremony.

They returned shortly enough with the priest, who ran a simple enough ceremony that I'm confident I could have faked my way through. Ah well, it didn't take them much time to fetch the priest, so it's not worth complaining about. Besides, they did learn something interesting: the priest is hiding his son in the church basement, ever since his son was turned into a vampire.

This was our first indication of what we've stumbled into, by the way. I have a bad feeling about vampires, between the priest's son and Strahd... maybe focusing on learning magic that can deal with vampires would make more sense than wolves? We can manage these wolves, but vampires... hmmm.

Anyway, Kinnacia and Elwing apparently decided to ignore the vampire, and Emmeral and I felt no need to complain, so we left the church after the funeral to return to the burgomaster's house for the evening and rest before we set out in the morning. As we left, the priest did inform us of a few more things: that the Abbey of Saint Markovia in Kresk (just past Vallaki) would be safer for Irena and that the March of the Dead we'd heard about involves hundreds of souls rising from the nearby graveyard and marching north every night.

Personally, I'm against bringing Irena to Kresk; so long as Vallaki has somewhere decently safe for her, there's no reason for us to continue with her to Kresk. I'd rather we search for some way out of Barovia (country, again) or, well, I'll write about my talk with Strahd in a minute.

As for the March? Well, it certainly piqued my interest at the time. Clearly something interesting was animating the dead - and investigating that has gone well for me before. Unfortunately, we agreed that bringing Irena to safe haven took precedence, and so we didn't stay the night in Barovia to find out what exactly was going on.

On our way back to the burgomaster's house, Elwing proved that we hadn't completely removed the idiotic heroes from our group. We heard an old woman selling pastries the street over and

were inclined to investigate. Nothing seemed amiss at first, and I was inclined to ignore the woman, but I waited too long to speak; trouble found us, regardless. A couple answered one of the door's the witch knocked on and the witch stole their child. They were, obviously, distraught, but made no move to get the child back. As the witch carried on her way, Elwing made his move.

Elwing charged out to confront her, the rest of us reluctantly following. Irena, the coward she is, ran home. Then again, is it cowardice if she made the correct decision?

Continuing the trend of my being our spokesman, I convinced her to let the child go. She seemed completely willing to do so, and unwilling to go to blows, but that wasn't enough for us. Elwing and Kinnacia asked me to press the issue; I did, but I was nowhere near able to intimidate her into promising to never return. She simply laughed at me with a fire blazing in her eyes - I knew then that she was simply playing with us and could wipe the floor with any one of us.

I was stunned with fear, which Elwing of course took as a good reason to attack her. Immediately, she let out a flurry of magic - of perfectly controlled magic - to devastating effect. It took Emmeral diving in and noticeably hurting her (along with the rest of our group hitting her and even Tsmark helping out) before I was confident enough to join in. Even then, she focused her attention on me: after I launched a Fire Bolt at her, she simply laughed and launched one right back. Hers, mind, was significantly larger and more on-target than mine. I still remember her taunt: "let me show you what real magic looks like". Oh the things I could have learned from her if we'd have simply tried to be on her good side instead of attacking her blindly.

It was a boost to my self-confidence later, when she shot out three Magic Missiles at me and I responded with four right back at her: this time, my magic responded well and I knocked her back with the force of my willpower. My attack, in fact, was enough to terrify her into running away.

Mindlessly, our group chased after her; Elwing and Emmeral sprinting after her, while I followed only closely enough to not lose sight of the others. Bloodthirsty morons.

Finally, we cornered her in an alley. The others surrounded her, slicing at her with their sword, but even that was not quite enough to fell her. They finally knocked her down and Emmeral questioned her about the area; she said nothing of importance, other than mentioning again the Vistani camp. Perhaps it is worth returning east to visit that camp? I hadn't realized it at the time, but the fact that both the witch and Tsmark had mentioned it... maybe there is something of value there?

Emmeral - in a rare moment of absolute stupidity - answer the witch's question of whether we would trade her life for information by explaining that no, we would kill her either way. The witch, in a fit of anger, threw a flurry of spells at him, enough to knock him unconscious and give me some interesting ideas for spells. We eventually downed the witch, cutting her head off such that she disappeared in a blaze of dust, but hopefully the others will have learned a lesson from this.

Not that I think there's a big chance of that.

Having barely killed the witch that had been completely neutral to us, we continued on to Tsmark's house, only to find Strahd standing in the front yard, staring into the sky.

~~Strahd~~ was I don't know what to think about Strahd. Everyone acts as if he's the terrifyingly evil villain, but I'm not so sure.

He seemed... pleasant. I approached him and commented on the weather, and he seemed genuinely pleased at how nice it was (it was cold, cloudy, and rainy - a perfect day for a vampire). He

asked as to what we were up to, but didn't seem overly concerned that we were, technically, acting against him. He even asked as to what I, personally, wanted out of life.

He has power. He has knowledge. He has perfect control over himself. And he has immortality. He has... everything I want and he knows that - and he seems happy to share it with me. We didn't hammer out details or anything near that, especially not with the cleric breathing down my neck and Tsmark's hand suspiciously on his sword, but he offered everything I desire and didn't even seem like he'd ask anything in return.

What would an immortal vampire with a country under his control ask for, anyway? He has anything he desires, what need would he have of asking something from me?

Power like his, I can't even believe it. He can control the weather across all of Barovia - the entire country! - and bend it to his exact desires. He has long since discovered far more about the nature of magic than I, maybe than I ever will, and he would share that with me. He offered immortality, so I could continue my search infinitely.

I am incredibly tempted to take up his offer to join him.

Maybe he's evil? Maybe I'm evil for even considering it? I don't know. But what I do know is I need to know more.

The group still thinks I am searching for a way out of this Labelas-forsaken country, but that's only a ruse. Why would I want to escape this place when the target of all of my dreams is here? This doesn't mean I've given up my own search for the secrets of magic, not at all, but... well, I hope next time I speak with Strahd, there won't be an annoyingly nosy cleric watching me.

Seeing Tsmark get back-handed into the side of the house when he finally lost his temper and attacked Strahd was funny, mind. If only it had happened to Kinnacia.

Upon waking the next morning, we set out towards Vallaki, Treva in tow.

Towards Vallaki

The path to Vallaki was surprisingly active. Or, maybe surprising is the wrong word. I'm not sure I'm surprised by much in Barovia anymore.

We'd barely walked an hour when we came across a fork in the road; an empty gallows ahead of us, between the forks, and a silent graveyard to the north. Any sane person would simply ignore these and walk past, but our cleric, of course, stopped to peer at it intently, searching for who-knows-what historical or religious tidbit. We paused, waiting for her, just long enough to wake the place.

As we walked away, a sound behind us alerted us to a dead body, swinging in the gallows, where it had not been only seconds before. It turned to look at us, its eyes dull and dead.

I said this place didn't surprise me much anymore? Yeah, I take that back, I was not expecting the body.

Emmeral and Kinnacia went to investigate the body, against our better judgement, but it disappeared in a puff of smoke as she approached. I have no idea what it was doing there. I'm not inclined to

return to find out, either.

We hurried along, following the southern fork (remember: Vistani camp is probably down the northern road). Another hour and we came across the latest addition to our merry band of adventurers: Morianna.

It was as we walked through a dark forest, along a winding path, that we came across her. She looked terrible. Her back was to us, but even then we could see the weariness in her body, everything about her appeared bone-tired. The only thing keeping her awake, it seemed, was the group of wolves following her, barely being held back by her long and pointed stick.

The wolves didn't even notice us, so intent were they on following her, until Kinnacia let fly an arrow at them. Somehow, despite her general inability to aim the thing, she managed to hit the wolf dead-on. Suddenly, then, all the wolves were on us, leaving Morianna alone.

We fought the wolves off, coming out of it not much worse for the wear, but the danger was there. I'm not sure how good of an idea it is to give a cleric a crossbow she can barely fire at the best of times and fires stupidly at the worst of times.

The woman we'd rescued introduced herself as Morianna. She's local to Barovia, she said, but she described her hometown as "some place in the country, near Baratok", though she wouldn't give the name of the town, at first. She refused to answer any questions about her past, even now as we set up camp and asked her again, but she asked us many questions about ourselves, what we were up to, where we were going, and why. She insisted she's never heard of Dwarves or Elves as anything other than mythical creatures.

She asked to accompany us, and Kinnacia quickly jumped in to agree and fill her in on what we were up to. As we continued ahead, I fell back to walk with Emmeral.

I shared my suspicion of Morianna with him, and he seemed to agree. We briefly considered ditching them all, but I argued we were at least somewhat safer in a group - something that is certainly true, despite Emmeral being our strongest warrior by far. We could likely set off on our own, but I'm not yet sure it would be worth the effort, nor would it be worth making an enemy of the others.

Perhaps in the future. I will be keeping my eye on them.

We continued ahead, eventually reaching another fork in the road. The fork to the east appeared ornate, with stone steps leading off toward what I strongly suspect is the castle above Barovia (town) - Strahd's castle. I suspect we'll (or only some of us?) be returning back that way in the future.

Instead, we headed to the west toward Vallaki, through a set of huge gates and across a stone bridge. Across this bridge, two stone statues watched us from either side; the others appeared unconcerned, but I made sure to watch them carefully as we passed - I wouldn't put it past stone statues in this country to turn and follow us.

Surprisingly, nothing happened as we walked past the statues and through the gate. We simply continued ahead, along the road.

We passed a windmill to the west, its location matching the one I'd "inherited" from the Durst family. I said nothing to the others, and none of them considered it note-worthy. Given the magic present within the Durst house, I'd be unsurprised to find more secrets there; I'll need to return there, this time without a cleric or druid.

Speaking of druids, the road continued into a forest. A creepy forest, dark, and with trees that reached toward us to completely blocked out the sky. As we travelled, the forest murmured at us, growing more and more discontent. Eventually, I called out in Sylvanic that we meant no harm and simply wished to pass through. It was more out of annoyance than out of any real assumption that the trees around here spoke the same dialect as the trees in the Forgotten Realms.

Somehow, though, the trees understood me and responded without trying to kill us. I know, I was surprised too.

The trees calmed down and we soon ran across an old man sitting in the centre of the path. It turned out he was a druid, since Elwing immediately spoke to him in the flowing language of the Druids and he responded in kind. The man eventually left, and Elwing was left to translate.

Apparently, the old man is the keeper of that forest and was willing to let us pass only if we found "his friend" and convinced that friend to give us "a token" proving that the friend trusted us. Very vague, and nearly confusing enough to set us off track.

We turned back towards Barovia and grudgingly traced our path back out of the forest. Eventually, the sound of a horse racing around us alerted us to danger; we bunched up, watching the dark forest around us, only to find a skeletal man riding a horse, growing closer and closer to us with each pass.

We couldn't decide what to do about it; run, attack, or call out to him. Turns out we waited too long to decide; he came to a stop behind us, his weapon drawn.

I tried to talk to him, asked him who he was, what he wanted, why he was there. I couldn't get a response, he just stood there, not saying anything. Eventually, I gave up and started to continue walking away from him, convinced he was not the friend the druid had sent us for.

He seemed to be letting us go without any issue, when Kinnacia turned back and asked him if he was killed by a vampire. He nodded, the first response we'd gotten so far. She asked if he was looking for a vampire. Another nod. She informed him that we were taking Trena to Vallaki to protect her from vampires, that we were fighting against Strahd, and that seemed to be enough for him. A raven flew to sit on her shoulder, and the death-like man rode away.

I wonder how Kinnacia knew to ask him about vampires? It's a surprising leap of logic, in my mind; why would there be any connection between some undead horseman and vampires, and why would that be the one thing he would respond to? Something's not right here... not to mention her declaring our allegiance against Strahd. Without any of us even discussing whether we were actually aligned against him, too.

Anyway, we continued on to Vallaki after that. The druid was no longer watching the path, and the trees were silent as we passed, so I guess the raven counted as the token we were meant to search for.

It turns out we weren't too far away from Vallaki; another fifteen minutes past the place we'd met the druid and we could see the town.

It looked grim. Stakes everywhere, with decapitated wolves mounted on their tips. The walls themselves were made of fifteen-foot tall stakes, planted into the ground. Definitely the happiest of towns; when Emmeral suggested we camp outside of town for the night so we didn't have to approach this place in the dark, I couldn't have agreed more. Morianna was against that idea, but she didn't really have a good reason as to why. I'm not sure if our fears are unfounded, but I certainly don't want the city guards to mistake us for bandits and attack us.

I'm on first watch right now, along with Emmeral. The howl of wolves woke us earlier, but we couldn't find any of them near us, so we decided to ignore the sounds. The elves of our group won't have a problem with that, and Kinnacia seems to have fallen asleep recently, but Morianna is staring into the sky unblinkingly. Clearly, she has a thing against wolves.

Anyway, with Emmeral keeping watch as well, I don't mind spending the time filling in this journal. I feel better already, like my mind is ordered better. Not to mention that writing all of this helped me set my thoughts straight. Let's see, I have my todo list:

- study spellbook
- think about how my magic is developing
- chat with Strahd
- watch for suspicious behaviour from the others

Then there's the things we're doing as a group

- bring Trena to Vallaki, consider bringing her to Kresk
- figure out how to escape Barovia?

I guess that second one should be on my list as well, but it's not a huge priority for me yet. Maybe that's what I should tell the others my top priority is, though; it seems a bit less suspicious than letting them figure out the other ones.

Either way, my watch is just about ending. I'll spend a bit longer studying this book, then I'll spend my trance thinking about my magic.

Thirteen pages. Nine with headings, but can't decipher headings. Some sort of code? Need to consider this. If each section is a spell, five one-page spells, four two-page spells. Level of complication? Think difference between Fire Bolt and Magic Missile. Sections have subheadings, looks like three is most? Subheadings in common! Three specific subheadings, each spell has no more than those three. Section "auyvkae" has only text. Section "lkuhkres kyugk" has drawings, maybe maps? Section "mvktu" has diagrams; swirls, lines, arrows. What do the sections mean?

Prophecy

Four of glyphs, trader, is "history, knowledge of the ancient, to better understand our enemy", says "look to the wizard of wines, in wood and sand treasure hides". Five of stars, enchanter, is "powerful force for good and protection, a holy symbol of great hope", says "kneeling woman, a rose of great beauty plucked too soon, the master of the marsh knows of whom I speak". One of stars, avenger, is "power and strength, a weapon of vengeance, a sword of sunlight", says "the treasure lies in a dragon's house, in hands once clean and now corrupted". The beast card says "a werewolf holds a secret hatred for your enemy, use her hatred to your advantage" is "this card sheds light on one who will help you greatly in the battle against darkness". The broken one says "he haunts the tomb of the man he envied above all" and is "there is a creature of darkness who's powers are beyond mortality, this card will lead you to him".

"Each of you have a great and terrible destiny, a great and terrible challenge".

Ok, what was that? Arabelle just walked in with magic billowing out of her eyes to deliver a prophecy and I have no idea what is going on. First things first, we need to figure out who this enemy is. I'd assume Strahd, but we're not enemies with him, are we? I know I have no current intention of fighting against him, but maybe the others do? Would Arabelle, or whatever other-wordly force took over her body just now, know that?

Let's assume it's Strahd, that's the obvious answer. I guess it might be someone or something we don't know about yet, but... no, my gut tells me it's Strahd.

Alright, then let's figure out what this would mean. I'm pretty sure the trader refers to the Wizard of Wines winery, like is on the Vistani barrels of wine, and there's some sort of treasure in "wood and sand" near the winery that will tell us more about his past. The enchanter seems to talk about some sort of protective holy symbol; there's some young woman protecting it, maybe? I know that abandoned town to the south was near a marsh, the "master" of that place - whatever that means - probably could point us to this woman?

The avenger card is pretty straight-forward: a sword that can kill vampires, in the haunted house where the dragon was seen, and that there's someone there who is corrupted and currently holds the sword. The beast card seems to point to an ally, a werewolf woman that would fight against Strahd. And the broken one is about some immortal, powerful being in a tomb of some man he envied? That last one seems the most confusing to me, but I'll keep my eyes out for tombs. Or, uh, people with "powers beyond mortality", but I would be watching out for that anyway.

And as for the last line... I don't know. I never thought I had some "great and terrible destiny", but... well, I don't know what to think.

Ok, now that I've written that down, I just need to not think about it for a bit. Maybe it'll make more sense after a while, I don't know. The others are trancing or sleeping or passed out, so clearly they're thinking the same thing. I don't know.

It's been two days now since we camped outside Vallaki, and so much has happened. I'd originally planned to write yesterday, but we were in jail, and I haven't had any downtime until now. Looks like that was the last I wrote, so I'll start there.

Vallaki

We entered Vallaki yesterday morning, which seemed to have been a good choice given how much the city seems to hate anyone doing anything suspicious, like, say, entering the city in the dead of night. Kinnacia looked exhausted, having not slept a wink but the rest of us were in decent spirits.

We walked through the city, taking in its dark and gloomy atmosphere, until we came across the town inn. Between our appearance and our race (elves are unique around here? seems odd, given Dusk Elves), we'd been getting enough odd looks that we decided to stay outside the inn, at first. Kinnacia, Morianna, and Trena went in to inquire about rooms and ask about merchants in the city.

I have no idea why, but either Kinnacia, Morianna, or both had the bright idea to pre-pay for their rooms. That turned out to not work so well for them! They also bought Irena a room, which she stayed in all day.

The rest of us made a bee-line to the town square, where Kinnacia had been directed to by the innkeeper. This was the first time we saw Izek, who I'm glad we are not on the bad side of. He has a strange arm that looks strong, and warped somehow. I would not want to get into a fight with him.

Izek was standing guard over the stockades, where some poor villager was locked. He was wearing a donkey mask; I wasn't sure at first whether that was the crime or the punishment, but it turns out this is how they punish people for "not being happy enough". The burgomaster is demented.

The weapons shop was convenient for Emmeral, at least. The rest of us didn't see anything useful for ourselves, but he bought a nice silver sword.

That seems like a great idea to me, by the way. I've read the lore, silver is supposed to be better against unholy creatures, which there seems to be a lot of in this country. All the better for us that he can deal with them.

The general store across the way, though, that was an absolutely wonderful find. Elwing and Emmeral bought flutes, but far more importantly: he had maps! We each bought a map of Barovia, just to be sure, and I bought a map of Vallaki, as well. I had my head stuck in that map for ages after we found them, it feels wonderful to finally have some idea of where we are, where the other places we hear of are, and how to get between those places. I noticed the others speaking with Izek, but I didn't care much then and I don't really now; I was far too engrossed looking at the map.

I've been marking off my copy with the various tidbits of information we've heard in our travels - it's quickly becoming well filled-in.

After a while, I noticed the conversation had stopped and Izek had left the area. Glancing down at my new map of Vallaki, I suggested we head east; there was another town square that way, and I was happy with our luck so far.

The area I'd directed us to wasn't at all the same as the first. It was more of a warehouse district, with several large, box-like buildings, the coffin-maker's shop, and Rictavio's caravan. Upon noticing that something within the caravan was growling, Elwing investigated a bit closer: as he tells it, the caravan contains a saber-toothed tiger, though both Rictavio and his guards simply described it as a normal lion. I'm inclined to trust the latter of those groups; we saw Elwing slip his hand through the bars, only to jump back a moment later as the beast jumped at him. Some druid he is.

The sounds of the beast clearly alerted Rictavio's guards, who ran out at us with their swords drawn and demanded Elwing back away from the animal. At this point, I should note, the rest of us were edging away from both the conflict and the clearly deranged druid.

The guards seemed content to let him go with a warning, though. In fact, they gave us some useful information that helped me get on Rictavio's good side, later; they mentioned that it was Rictavio that had captured the beast, and the Rictavio would be performing at the upcoming Festival of the Sun. A Festival I have no intention of intending, thank you very much.

At this point, Kinnacia wanted to head back to the inn to drop off some of her equipment and check on Irena. The others thought this was reasonable, though for some reason Elwing wanted us

to look for a zoo (we vetoed that), so we headed back.

Kinnacia, Morianna, and Elwing decided to head upstairs together, which left me and Emmeral to do some fact-finding. We entered the inn and both seemed to see the two sources of information at the same time: the barkeep, since barkeeps are always a good source of information, and the fanciful-looking folk in the corner. With a nod at each other, we split off; Emmeral to speak with the barkeep while I spoke with Rictavio.

Oh Rictavio, what an interesting man to find in a place such as Vallaki. He's an elf, though he didn't say it aloud and simply brought my attention to his ear (I attempted this again today, with a Dusk Elf, but this does not seem to be the way local Elves identify themselves, as I'd thought at this point). I got some interesting gossip out of him, once I impressed him enough with a simple Prestidigitator for him to ask if I would like to travel with him to perform. I'm not overly interested in being a performer, but this may give me a good excuse to travel around the area and explore. It's something I'll consider once he's left Vallaki.

Rictavio told me more about the upcoming festival, that it's dedicated to the Sun God of this area and is one of many festivals the burgomaster throws - apparently he throws a festival that every citizen is required to attend every week in Vallaki. This festival is the day after tomorrow, exactly seven days after the previous one (the Festival of the Wolf Head, or something like that, which explains all the wolf heads on pikes outside). Rictavio will be performing at the festival, showing off the lion he'd recently captured and tamed. I mentioned Elwing's abilities with animals (still not sure he has these, other than the wolves from last week seeming to like him eventually) and informed him that I'd have the druid come speak with him later.

He also told me about the Vistani camp to the west. They seem to be the talk of the town; between all of us, we got directed that way nearly half a dozen times. In retrospect, this may have been the hands of fate guiding us; if we hadn't have gone to the Vistani camp, I wonder if we'd have heard the prophecy?

I said my goodbyes to Rictavio, promising to watch his performance if our "wandering souls didn't guide my group of adventurers onwards" (yes, I know), and caught the tail-end of Emmeral's chat with the barkeep.

Emmeral accomplished a bit more with his fact-finding than I did, not that I'm surprised; the barkeep gave him a good explanation of the surrounding area and some gossip which he passed along to me:

- the Vistani camp, again, and that it may be worth visiting,
- Kresk, being the city to the west with the Abbey of Saint Markovia, was a safe haven,
- Lake Baratok, which has an abandoned tower,
- an abandoned city in a marsh to the south, which rebelled against Strahd, and
- a haunted house to the south-west which used to house a dragon

When Elwing, Kinnacia, and Morianna, joined us at the bar - where we'd sat and ordered some wine while we discussed the area around us - Emmeral passed along all the information he'd given to me (except the dragon, which makes sense to me - I bet a dragon would guard some pretty interesting treasures, no point sharing those with people we don't trust). The fact that he kept some of the information between only us means he may have kept some information from me...

but I'm not overly worried. The fact that he shared the gossip about the dragon tells me he thinks of me as a potential ally, which is enough for me.

I mentioned to Elwing that Dictavio was the one that had tamed the "saber-toothed tiger". Elwing got into a bit of a huff over that, and went over to give Dictavio a piece of his mind. Dictavio, though, just told some stories about his capture of both the lion and a pet monkey he once had, but had since given away to the toy-maker of Vallaki - we actually saw that monkey performing outside the toy-maker's shop on our way out of the city today.

Dictavio's stories completely distracted Elwing; it was hilarious to watch him lose his train of thought like that. Maybe I should work on my story-telling ability so I can distract Elwing the next time he tries to do something stupid?

We headed west from there, continuing to explore the city, with the vague destination of Vallaki's church in mind. Outside, a young boy dug a grave - Morianna chatted with him for a moment and we found there was no pressing need for the grave, rather someone would die eventually and would need a grave. Hearing the two talk made me depressed; both Morianna and the boy have no life to them, they feel utterly without motivation. I'd summarize their conversation as: "The world sucks, doesn't it?" "yup".

We entered the church, genuflecting in the same way other members of the congregation did, and listened to the sermon for a while. Speaking of depressing, the whole sermon was very somber: lots of talk about the state of everything being pretty sad. Not a happy place to be, that's for sure.

After the sermon, we talked with the priest for a moment. He offered sanctuary for Trena, which we gladly accepted on her behalf; and with that, our promise to Tsmark was concluded. Upon noticing Kinnacia, though, the priest tried to draft us into helping us with something. He pulled us to the side and spoke quietly about the protection around the church; a set of holy bones that apparently kept everyone safe.

It felt like needless superstition to me at first, though it turns out those bones were in fact magical, imbued with a protective spell. Either way, Kinnacia was all for helping him and, since we didn't really have anything better to do, we agreed to go along with her. Emmeral was against it, but that seemed to have just motivated him to do the detective work faster.

The priest told us that he'd only mentioned the bones to one other soul; a young, scared altar boy, who we spoke with immediately. That altar boy directed us to the boy outside who we'd spoken to on our way in. The boy outside was less cooperative; it took Emmeral lifting him off the ground and interrogating him before the boy would talk.

It turns out, the boy had stolen the bones on behalf of the coffin-maker. Now annoyed that we had to walk clear across town, Emmeral took off in a huff and we followed after him.

Vampires in the Coffin-Maker's Coffins... I Get it Now

Upon reaching the coffin-maker's shop, we knocked loudly. He told us to go away since he was closed, so I knocked again and demanded he let us in. Again, he told us to go away, so Emmeral broke down the door.

That was quite the sight for the coffin-maker, I bet. Two loud bashes on his door, then with the third the door simply shattered to pieces as Emmeral barreled through, the rest of us with raised

weapons behind him. I'm sure I looked positively impressive, with the wisps of a Fire Boltwhirling around my finger tips. I must say, my ability to call upon at least a subset of my spells at will is becoming quite impressive. I swear I could hurl hundreds of Fire Bolts in a day without care... it's intoxicating.

Anyway, the coffin maker was incredibly terrified (reasonable), so I played on his fear to demand he tell us where the bones were. Upon being informed the bones were upstairs, I ordered him to lead the way.

He lead us to the top of the stairs before falling into a quivering mess. At first, I was sure he was trying to trick us, but it turns out he, Labelas rest his soul, was simply terrified at the six vampires in the room we were about to enter. Apparently, it was at their command that he'd stolen the bones; they were planning on breaking into the church, we assume, and had used the coffin-maker as a scapegoat to remove the church's protections.

Sure enough, Emmeral was talented enough to sneak through the vampires' room without alerting them while Kinnacia and I investigated the coffin-maker's bedroom next door. I felt confident there would be some back panel in his bedroom that would hide the bones - Kinnacia had cast Detect Magic and determined their approximate location as being behind the wall (I think I might have figured out how she did so? will need to think about it further) - but I couldn't seem to find it. I did, though, find a colourful stone with a perfectly white circle on it - something about it drew me to take it. I'm not sure why, but I've been meditating on it a while now. I'm almost convinced it's simply a bauble, but not quite yet.

Emmeral finished his investigation of the other room and let us know; the vampires were likely resting in the various boxes around the room, but did not seem to be awake. He told us he would need to move one of the coffins to get at the bones and that if a vampire was asleep in that coffin we'd have to fight.

Turns out he was pretty accurate in his report. He re-entered the room with the intention of taking any vampire within the coffin off-guard and yelled for help only seconds later. As we barrelled into the room, we saw him wrapped up in a fight with the vampire that had previously been resting peacefully. Three other vampires were emerging from their coffins, and another two stirred in a couple nearby coffins.

We bounced into action: Kinnacia cast Turn Undead, immediately causing the three vampires farthest from us to flee in terror, Elwing leaped onto the coffins of the slow vampires, turning into a bear to hold down the lids, and Morianna and I raced forward to help Emmeral.

This was the most terrifying fight I've been in in my life. Even the fight with Viktor, if you could even call it a fight, was nothing like the primal fear I felt upon seeing these vampires.

Somehow we actually managed to hold our own, at first. Between the awesome power of Kinnacia turning aside the undead, Emmeral's flashing swords, and my growing magic, we even managed to kill two of them. Whether they stay dead or not, mind, I have no idea; we need to figure out how to actually fight vampires, given this seems to be a pretty common thing around here.

After we killed the first one, I ran to grab the bones. That they were hidden in a chest with a false bottom almost confused me, but I figured it out.

After I returned to the fight with the bones, the vampires started going after me a bit more. My mage armor was enough to protect me, but only barely. Once Kinnacia's Turn Undead wore off, the fight quickly turned against us.

We fought for barely a minute before we realized it was hopeless. Emmeral and I seemed to have the same idea at the same time; just as I started making plans to escape from the fight, he asked me to throw him the bones to "distract the vampires by running away". No way that was gonna happen.

Seconds after I yelled a "no" to him, Elwing let out a Thunder Wave. It did a lot... to us. The vampires seemed unaffected, but Morianna and Emmeral were visibly winded. Unperturbed by this, Elwing cast another Thunder Wave, this time knocking Morianna and Emmeral completely unconscious. It knocked the vampires away from a moment, but it still helped them far more than it helped us.

With half the group nearly killed by Elwing, I began to flee the room. Let the others get killed, eat, or vampirized, I didn't care, I just wanted to survive. And to get away from Elwing, whose motivations I can not figure out whatsoever. Is he trying to kill us? I have no idea. He seems to be on our side for the most part, even seems to genuinely want to be helpful, but then he goes and does things like that. Maybe he is just terrible at thinking on his feet; again, maybe I need to ingratiate myself with him enough to have him obey me in combat.

Either way, as I fled the room, Elwing did an about-face again. Refusing to leave without the others, he transformed again into a bear (looks like he can't use magic while transformed?), lifted Morianna in his mouth, had Kinnacia jump on his back, and carry Emmeral. It was... impressive... how he managed to save the other three simply by being a bear.

I need to figure out how to do that.

As we raced out of the room, groups of guards raced in to hold back the vampires. We never did find out whether they won or lost, whether the vampires fled or killed them, but at least one of the guards survived to inform the burgomaster or our "complicity in bring vampires into Vallaki". Fool.

With the guards holding the vampires away from us, we managed to escape. Still, if it hadn't been for the perfect circumstances there, I'd be dead right now. Not a good thought at all.

We raced back to the church. For some idiotic reason, Kinnacia began to yell at the priest that we'd recovered the bones well within the earshot of the congregation that the priest had explicitly told us the bones were being kept a secret from. She seemed abashed enough when the priest called her on it, though still tried to insist he pry up the floorboards in front of the congregation to replace the bones.

It's as if I'm surrounded by idiots sometimes, I don't understand it.

The priest thanked us, though he appeared as annoyed as I was at Kinnacia's outburst. He insisted we ask for a reward from the burgomaster's wife (that's never going to happen now) and we told him we'd bring Trena to the church first, to see her safely away, then head on to see the burgomaster's wife.

Arrested

We returned to the inn and into Trena's room, completely oblivious to the guards organizing around us. We should have kept a lookout, but no; we all walked into Trena's room (without knocking - Kinnacia got stabbed by a terrified Trena) and, when we exited, a dozen guards were set to arrest us for "causing a disturbance".

They refused to respond to questions as to why we were being arrested, other than informing us the burgomaster requested it. That's about the point when I realized the reward for protecting the bones would not be happening.

Emmeral resisted arrest; when the guards demanded we disarm, he simply crouched with his swords on the ground. Following his idea, I dropped my as-of-yet unused crossbow and declared myself "unarmed". A second later, Emmeral sprinted away from us, weapons still in hand, attempting to escape. The guards were ready for this, though, and tripped him, kicked away his weapons, and manacled us all together. Maybe they'd have done that anyway, but it certainly wasn't pleasant. I'm not opposed to Emmeral having tried to escape, but I wonder if he'd have come back to free us if he'd succeeded? I feel confident my magic would have saved me, but it would be good to know how much he is on my side.

The guards brought us to a jail underneath the burgomaster's house with an incredibly convenient six unused cells next to each other. Stripsearching us for all our equipment, they threw us in the cells like vermin, no matter how I tried to convince them to let us speak with the burgomaster immediately. Izek stood watch over us all night, not even moving a muscle, after informing us the burgomaster would speak with us at his convenience the next day. Nightmarish. They took everything from us; my focus, my spellbook, this journal, everyone else's equipment, everything.

Elwing again confused me that night by being incredibly useful; after discussing with each other (in Elvish, obviously. We didn't want Izek to overhear and understand - Irena, Morianna, and Kinnacia slept through this since they don't speak Elvish. Maybe we should teach them?) about what we should do (escape together? have one of us escape? stay?), Elwing went off as a spider to gather intelligence.

He went off twice; once to speak with the only other occupant of the prison and once to explore the burgomaster's house. Both times, we arranged it such that he went off between the changing of the guard so he would not be noticed.

He didn't find much out from exploring, other than apparently seeing a saddened maid cleaning up the dining room. Knowing she was sad was useful later, but it certainly didn't help us out that night.

From the other prisoner, we learned a lot, though.

As relayed by Elwing, the other prisoner was happy to stay in prison rather than attempt to escape; his punishment would simply be a day of embarrassment in the stocks while wearing a donkey's head. He had no idea how we would be punished, but offered some valuable insight into the burgomaster.

The burgomaster is a proud, arrogant man, insistent that Vallaki is a safe haven where "all is well", all the time. Citizens who aren't "happy enough" are arrested by his men, and no negative talk is permitted. This gave me enough knowledge to convince the burgomaster to free us the next day... I'm sure I could have managed without Elwing's intelligence, but he was... helpful, I suppose.

Then again, he did have the stupid idea of stealing servant clothing and disguising himself. How the burgomaster would not realize that he now had five servants, one of which he didn't recognize... Elwing certainly doesn't have the best of ideas.

One of the most annoying parts of getting arrested was how much time it wasted. I could have spent several hours that night examining the spellbook, updating this journal... as is, I'm sure

I've forgotten something that happened that day, what with all that's happened, and I can't shake the feeling that it might be important. At least tonight I can study the spellbook more, but I feel like I'm so close to deciphering it. If I could have spent hours on it last night, maybe yesterday would have turned out a bit better.

The burgomaster came for us in the morning, after the guards had brought the other prisoner to the stocks. He took his time, mind, it was certainly late in the morning before he designed to speak with us.

Once again acting as our spokesman, I told him that the vampires were already present and that we'd been sent on a holy mission by the priest, though I was really very sorry that I couldn't break the priest's confidence on what the mission was.

Though he insisted we had no proof that the vampires were already there (apparently the coffin maker was found hanging, probably was killed by the vampires), but took my bait on the holy mission. He demanded to know what the mission was, so I "grudgingly" told him that since he was a respectable man he could be trusted with the knowledge of the priest's bones.

The flattery apparently did wonders, as did my insistence that the priest would back my story, since he let us free with a warning at that.

If I ever need to convince him of anything else he'd be against, it may be possible by referring to it as a favour for the priest. For some reason, the burgomaster seems to hold him in high regards; I'm sure I can abuse this.

Now I remember what it was I forgot. The priest's name, for the life of me I can't remember it. I wonder if Kinnacia remembers? I'll have to ask her, just in case.

Lucian Petrovich

Turns out there may have been an easier way to convince him; he recognized Irena immediately upon setting us free and apologized profusely for locking her up (might be able to use this for future favours, too). Immediately, he invited us to breakfast with him and invited Irena to stay in his house, safe with him.

Now free, and with our equipment back (I need some way to hide my focus, at least, so it can't be taken away again), we joined him for breakfast.

The Burgomaster's Family Trouble

Over breakfast, we were introduced to his wife; a demented woman, her only contribution to the conversation was to giggle mindlessly every time the burgomaster (Vargas Valakovich) spoke and insist that "all is well" and her servant had "no reason to leave the house - all is well!".

Irena formally accepted his offer for her to stay there, finally freeing us of our guest. The burgomaster, I notice, waited until after she'd agreed to inform us about his missing servants; apparently two of them had gone missing in the past while (week or two, I think), which explained the empty servant's beds Elwing had reported the night before.

Trying to show we were now on his good side, we agreed to help him find his missing servants; he was helpful here, at first, allowing us have free reign of his house to investigate, question any of his remaining servants, and answering all our questions truthfull (probably).

Following breakfast, we set off to explore; here, Elwing's knowledge of the maid's depressed look the night before was helpful - upon bringing it up, she confirmed that "all was not well", that the burgomaster's son Viktor was a recluse that did not get along with the burgomaster, and that he may no more about the missing servants.

She directed us to his room, which we immediately headed toward.

The room was unlocked, but empty; nothing was out of place there. The room held a bookshelf, but none of the books appeared to be anything other than normal. Emmeral briefly examined a book of fairy tales, but it appeared to be normal. He certainly managed to hide his procivilities completely.

Continuing our exploration, we found several locked rooms; the only that we could enter without breaking in were the burgomaster's study and the master bedroom, where we found the entrance to the attic.

The study contained nothing useful, but the bedroom held some interest.

I need to work on my identification of magical objects. I'm sure there was something interesting about the mirror, if only I could have figured it out. A mirror in the burgomaster's bedroom caught our eye since it appeared to be a normal mirror for the others, but Emmeral and I saw ourselves aged immensely in the reflection.

Kinnacia cast Detect Magic and informed us that the mirror was a source of conjuration magic. She also mentioned abjuration and evocation artefacts upstairs. Why she chose to remark on those, but not the necromantic magic, I have no idea. Maybe clerics aren't very good at identifying necromancy? I would assume it would be an important skill, but maybe I misunderstand; it could be that recognizing the opposite of one's own magic is impossible.

I'll think about that more, but more likely she just decided not to mention it for her own reasons. I don't trust her, obviously.

Either way, I really need to learn how to Detect Magic like she can. Several times this has come up, my inability is inexcusable. Also some way to identify the properties of a magical object more in depth than simply its class of magic... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The reason I need to learn how to better identify objects is that I accidentally broke the mirror; in some ways, I'm happy, since the method of breaking it proved that it may have been dangerous, but on the other hand... well, maybe we could have used the mirror for our own good.

I don't know if there's anything else I could have done without magic. I inspected the mirror and its frame, touched it, even, stared into my reflection. Nothing. Eventually, considering the conjuration magic, I wondered if I could try to interact with my reflection as if it were a real creature.

Visualizing a hand that could grasp at its shoulder, I cast Chill Touch. The mirror shattered, but in the moment before this, I'm sure I saw the hand grasp its shoulder but not mine - I'm confident that is proof there was some being within the mirror. Whether it was an enemy or not, I'm unsure.

The Chill Touch's cast seems extraordinarily useful. The skeletal hand feels like necromancy, which I have never been able to cast before; this is probably incredibly useful against vampires, not to mention I feel like this has opened the entire field of necromantic magic up to me. I can't wait to learn more.

Elwing was less enthused by the broken mirror; he seemed genuinely angry that I'd broken it. Kinnacia insisted I'd have to pay the burgomaster to repair the mirror, but having the burgomaster throw us out of his house fixed that problem.

The attic was crowded. A single foot path through the dirty main room forced us to walk in line; this turned out lucky for me, actually, since I was fourth in line. At the end of the path was a door, with the mark of abjuration Kinnacia had mentioned earlier. I used Mage Hand to open the door, setting off a trap: lightning was shot at us, but fortunately Morianna raised her shield in time to prevent it from hitting most of us. Kinnacia and Emmeral were less fortunate, being in front.

Immediately after opening the door, Emmeral charged in with his swords drawn, ready for a fight. Inside, though, we saw nothing; a study with books (that I would love to get my hands on), necromantically animated cat skeletons (that Kinnacia still hadn't mentioned wreaked with necromancy), a rug over the evocation magic she'd identified earlier, and a chest in the corner.

Also, three creepy children in the corner of the room, staring at the wall and not moving.

We didn't have much time to look around, though; Kinnacia reported some illusion magic in the corner, called out "hello", and then shrugged as if nothing was there.

Again, I really need to learn how to Detect Magic. If only I could have been watching the magic of the room myself, I'm sure I would have understood what had happened.

At this point, the cats attacked us; Kinnacia helpfully mentioning now that they were necromantic.

Morianna and Emmeral made short work of the cats, chasing them down even once they'd fled for us, though I have no idea why they were so insistent. The fight over (so we thought), I went to examine the chest in the corner.

Clothes. I have no idea why Viktor cared enough to put clothes in what otherwise appeared to be a treasure chest.

Suddenly, a Fireball hit us. I was completely knocked out by this; when the others lifted me up, I found that Kinnacia had also been knocked out. Clearly this was a powerful Fireball cast by a powerful mage - I wanted nothing to do with that.

As I began to flee, a bolt of ice flew into the room and demolished us again. Morianna seemed mostly unaffected by this, but apparently we were all knocked out. As she tells it, Viktor yelled at us to leave after casting the bolt and she snapped back that she was trying to heal us so we could leave.

Once we were all back on our feet, we sprinted away from Viktor's room. We seem to be sprinting away from fights a lot lately, clearly we need to fix something. I think in this case, Emmeral bursting into the room with his swords drawn couldn't have helped. We need to be less aggressive and avoid making people hate us.

As we fled the burgomaster's house, he (the burgomaster) caught up with us. He yelled at us for causing a disturbance, so I fired right back that Viktor was the one to blame. He got angry that we'd accused his "perfect son" and told us to leave his house. Since that was exactly what I was after, I consider that to be a good thing.

From there, we intended to head toward the inn to regroup.

On our way, though, we noticed we were being followed by an old man in a dark cloak. It's always one thing after another around here, I'm starting to get sick of it.

Still terrified because of Viktor, we didn't want to take any chances. We turned into an alley and Emmeral readied himself to grab the man. The rest of us had weapons drawn, waiting for the worst case scenario, whatever Labelas decided that would be.

Turned out we needn't have worried. The man claimed to be a servant of Lady Fiona Watcher, who would "rather serve the Devil than the burgomaster". That's clearly an exaggeration, but either way, someone who hates the burgomaster than much may be a good ally to have. He told us the Lady wished to speak with us and that we should go speak to her at our earliest convenience.

We told him we would consider it and let him go.

Back at the inn, we took some time to relax and re-gain our peace of mind. Rictario was sitting in the same place he'd been before. He caught my eye as we entered, so I made sure to speak with him before we left the inn.

Morianna went to speak with some hunters in the corner, but apparently her talk provided no useful information. While she was speaking with them, though, we decided to leave this town and head for the Vistani camp nearby: hopefully they would be less likely to try to kill us, we thought. Turns out we were right, this time, which was nice. In fact, since leaving Vallaki today, no one has tried to kill us. It feels weird.

On our way out, I said my goodbyes to Rictario. I made sure to imply we might come back for the festival to see his "wonderful performance", but that our "wandering souls" would likely lead us away.

Ugh, there's no way we're returning to Vallaki without the best of reasons.

The Vistani

We left the city through a side gate nearest the Vistani camp and headed through the forest paths to their camp.

At first, I thought we'd found somewhere as bad as Vallaki, since the first two Vistani we saw were in the main tent, beating a young boy half to death. Turns out the kid had failed to watch the Vistani leader's daughter and was completely willing to be punished, which set my mind at ease.

It didn't make Kinnacia feel better about the beating, though. She immediately stepped in and offered my assistance in interrogating the kid rather than beating him.

Yeah, she offered my assistance. Without asking me. Damned cleric.

With the two Vistani looking at me expectantly, I questioned the kid. It turned out he'd lost track of a girl named Arabella, the daughter of the man that'd been beating him (also the leader of the Vistani camp - Luvash). He wasn't watching her particularly closely, cause no one expected her to run off, so we didn't even have a starting point in looking for her.

Oh, did I not mention that? Yeah, Kinnacia also offered our services in finding her. It turned out well for us what with the prophecy and all, but still...

Anyway, about this time Elwing switched back to being useful again; he told the men we had a dog that could track down the daughter by scent. Luvash got a hopeful look on his face at this and brought us to his wagon-house to give us something for "our dog" to smell.

Elwing and Morianna went in to the wagon while the rest of us waited outside. The golden hubcaps on the wagon look really expensive and Emmeral was certainly eyeing them speculatively... if he plans on taking them, I want in.

A few minutes later, they walked out of the wagon, waited a moment, Elwing transformed into a dog, and they re-entered the wagon. My best guess for their odd behaviour is that Elwing didn't want to reveal he could shape-shift, though that didn't last long. Uh, I'll explain soon.

Seconds later, Elwing (the dog) burst through the door of the wagon and started scampering north. Luvash yelled for his brother (the other man who'd been in the tent with us, named Arrigal) to join us and we set off.

We followed El-dog-wing north around Vallaki and toward Lake Zarovich. At first we were worried he was leading us back into Vallaki, but that didn't end up happening.

We found a few boats tied up on the shore and a lone fisherman sitting on a boat in the middle of the lake. As we stood, discussing our options (Dogwing had lost the scent at the shore), the fisherman stood at threw a burlap sack into the lake.

A burlap sack roughly the size and shape of a young girl.

Without pausing for thought, the six of us burst into action: Eldog leaped into the lake, transforming back into himself and then into a crocodile before hitting the water and beelining toward the sack; Emmeral and I jumped for the nearest boat and rowed with all our (mostly his) strength; and Kinnacia, Morianna, and Arrigal did the same in a second boat.

El-croc lifted the sack out of the water, bringing it toward Arrigal's boat while we charged ahead to the fisherman. He made no move at any point, nor did he speak at all... it was eerie.

Behind us, Kinnacia had pulled the little girl from the sack and was at work healing her. With a sputtering breath, she was eventually saved.

At this point, I realized we'd saved... maybe a vampire? I thought so at first, but I'm less sure now. Either way, something is weird about that girl. She was utterly calm at having just about died.

Having just woken from near death, Arabella explained her situation: she'd been taken by the man and had been in that bag ever since. She did this calmly, impassively... maybe she is a vampire?

Well, at the time, I thought she might have been a vampire and figured we should stay on her good side, just in case. I deferred to her on what she would like done with the fisherman.

She very calmly informed us she did not care about him and that she really only cared about returning to the Vistani.

With a nod, I ordered Kinnacia and Morianna to take her to shore. Arrigal jumped over to our boat and we pulled alongside the fisherman.

No matter what we asked, the fisherman said nothing, made no move, and simply continued to hold his fishing rod in the lake. Eventually, with a shrug, Emmeral lendded his sword to Arrigal. Arrigal stabbed the fisherman... a dozen times, maybe? He clearly has some anger issues, but then, the man had just stolen his niece.

The fisherman had no reaction, even to getting stabbed. Maybe he was in some sort of magical trance? Yet another reason I need to learn how to Detect Magic.

We brought his boat back to shore and brought the girl home, Morianna cradling her in her arms the entire way. Along the way, Crocwing reverted himself to his Elven form and explained his shapeshifting to Arrigal.

"That sounds useful," Arrigal said, clearly overwhelmed and a bit confused.

As we returned to the camp, we found a large crowd of Vistani waiting for us, along with what we later found out was a Dusk Elf.

An elf! Here, in Barovia! I'm starting to doubt Morianna's claim that she'd thought we were mythical creatures; Dusk Elves live here in the camp, Rictavio himself is an elf, ... we've been here only half a week and we've already come across several Elves other than ourselves.

Not that the elf was much interested in conversing with us.

Luvash, of course, was overjoyed that we'd recovered his daughter and threw a feast in our honour. He had his man bring out dozens of casks of wine - all labelled with a wizard hat, like the prophecy described - and everyone went wild.

Kinnacia challenged Arrigal to a drinking competition. Utterly foolish, since she passed out after two flagons, but pretty funny to watch. For us, at least, I'm sure she'll have a wicked headache tomorrow.

The rest of us were approached by Luvash shortly after that; he brought us to a locked weapon containing all the Vistani's wealth and told us to "take anything".

Well, we're not going to say no to an offer like that.

We all headed for the jewelery box first; everything looked gaudy to me, but Morianna took a necklace to give to Kinnacia. Elwing grabbed a flask which Luvash described as "some sort of illusion magic". He later gave this to me because "I like magic"... I guess he's trying to get on my good side, but I have no idea why. It seemed so out of the blue...

Emmeral and I went for more traditional wealth, pulling coins from a wooden chest and an iron chest with gold and electrum filling them.

Thanking Luvash for his generosity, we left to re-join the party. After a while, we decided to see what we could learn from the elf.

As we approached his house, we noticed he'd been watching us through the window. He exited the house as we arrived, speaking with us outside.

I greeted him as a friend, showing my Elvish ear with the same motion I'd learned from Rictavio, but he didn't seem to care - he was rude, abrupt, and wanted nothing to do with us.

Morianna pried a bit, after he'd told us to leave, but all that accomplished was making him angry. We left after that; after I'd apologized for our rudeness. Elwing spoke at the elf in Druidic, apparently looking for a response, but the elf only gave him a blank look.

We headed back to the party. I noticed Emmeral peeled away from us to head back to the elf's house, but he later reported he'd learned nothing interesting. The night passed without much of interest after that - we learned that Elwing can play the flute he'd purchased the day before as he joined in with the band.

It was interesting to watch for a while, but eventually I left for the trailer Luvash had offered us for the night to study the spellbook for a while.

Eventually the others joined me and we went to sleep for the night, only to be woken what felt like minutes later by the prophetic Arabella.

Alright, now I'm caught up. It's been an hour or so since she delivered the prophecy and it's starting to make sense to me.

Here's what I think the prophecy means:

- Strahd is either working against us, or will be, or is or will work against at least some of us
- somewhere in the Wizards of Wine winery we'll find information on Strahd's past
- in a marsh (near the town to the south, probably), we'll find someone important that can direct us to a young woman, who either is or has some holy protection for us
- a sword made out of sunlight can be found in the haunted house where the dragon used to live
- a female werewolf that hates Strahd can be convinced to help us
- there is an immortal dark creature who lives near the tomb of a man he envied

These seem to be scattered all across Barovia. Once the others awake, we'll definitely be discussing which of these we should head to first. If any, that is, there's also the option of returning to Vallaki... I don't really want to return to the city, but then, the Madam Watcher character sounds like the sort of person we don't want to anger by refusing her request to meet... I don't know. Hopefully, the others will have some insight.

"muklu" section swirls in common between pages? Bottom of page four, top of page nine. Something about swirl pattern on five looks familiar... why? Try notations as hand movements? Not both hands. Not left, right still. Not right, left still. Visualize? No. Need focus? Focus in left, move right hand, feel something. Magic is responding?

Movements on page five pulls my magic up, feels like the moment before a normal spell before fading. Need some release on this spell. Spell has "auyrkae" section, required? Maybe is verbal component? Why do other section diagrams have no effect when doing same? Spells with "lkuhkres kyugk" make sense, maybe need something else, but with only "auyrkae" as well should have same effect...

Magic Missile. I knew it, I knew I recognized it! As soon as I let the movements become more relaxed, it just came to mind: I was making the same movements with my hands that my magic makes inside me when letting out Magic Missiles. As soon as I realized this, my magic responded.

If this is how this spellbook records magic, I can figure it out.

Hold Person and Invisibility are in this book. I knew how to cast them already, but this is giving me more to work with. Both had "lkuhkres kyugk", I wonder if this is related to them only working while I'm holding my focus? Maybe they describe physical spell components...

I've done it! This entire book, I understand it all! I can cast any of them, I understand! Disguise Self, Identify, Mage Armor, Magic Weapon, Protection from Good and Evil... everything in this

book will be useful. And now that I've deciphered one spellbook, I'm sure I could do it again.

I need to find another spellbook and find out what is the same between wizards. Already I've learned so much: that magic has forms, each spell representing itself differently in shape, in feel, in how it moves. Any magic can shape itself into the right form to suit my desires, sometimes, but now... now I can help it along, bound it to the shape of the spell I want rather than relying so much on luck.

I feel like I have so much more control over it, that I can learn to bend it exactly to my will. I'm exhausted now, but tomorrow... I hope I get a good excuse to exercise my new powers, to figure out exactly what my new limits are.

The Watchers

When we woke up this morning, Emmeral shared his knowledge of the dragon in the haunted house with the others. He seems very excited about the possibility of a sun sword; seeing him eviscerate our enemies makes me agree pretty strongly. A sword of prophecy? That's exactly what I want our best warrior to carry.

Emmeral argued strongly for heading toward the dragon, Morianna argued for heading to the Wizards of Wine winery near Kresk. We ended up compromising; I convinced them to talk with Lady Watcher before leaving the area - something about what we'd heard of her set me on edge, I didn't want to get on her bad side. Given the whole demon-thing, I think I made the right decision.

Our argument got a bit too loud, loud enough to wake up a groggy Luvash. He was initially angry at us waking him, but we calmed him down by offering to pick up some more wine for them from the Winery - we knew we'd head there eventually. He offered us a caravan to carry the wine, so we promised we'd return soon to fetch them. In the mean time, we headed toward Vallaki.

I still can't believe we went back there. And that we're going back again tomorrow. Terrible city that it is... but hopefully tomorrow will fix that.

We should have tried to sneak into the city, none of us had realized we'd been banned. The guards immediately moved to close the gates against us, but a handy bit of magic saw us through: I cast Invisibility on myself and Emmeral, then Misty Stepped through the gates right in front of the guards. Elwing became a horse and galloped in behind us; the others were trapped outside, being unable to cover that much distance without being stopped by the guards.

And so we were split; Emmeral, Elwing, and I met around the Watcher family house, and Morianna and Kinaacia explored in the area around the city.

Being invisible and trying to meet up with an invisible ally was... interesting. We had a vague understanding that we would both be heading toward the Watcher house, but heading there together wasn't really an option. We also had to rely on our memories of the location of the house, since, you know, invisible maps.

When I approached the house, I noticed the family's scarecrow had been moved to point very clearly toward their back door. Note to self: Emmeral is not quite as subtle as he potentially could

be.

I turned myself visible again while continuing to concentrate on Emmeral's invisibility and knocked on the rear door. Emmeral acted wonderfully here; without needing to discuss any plans, he acted perfectly as backup for the entire talk with Lady Watcher.

Upon knocking on the back door, a servant answered. He asked why we were here, I informed him Lady Fiona requested our presence. He asked why we were at the back door, I insisted the "burgomaster has eyes everywhere". That was enough for him; if tomorrow does not work out in our favour, I'll need to remember this.

After a moment, the door swung open.

The Watcher family's house was arranged along a path, doors left strategically opened and closed to lead us directly to the dining room. I very carefully followed this path - I wanted to make sure I put the right foot forward. In the dining room, I found Lady Watcher sitting alone.

Well, I say alone, but she wasn't - not really. A small red demon - some sort of imp, perhaps? - sat on her shoulder, watching me for the entire conversation. I didn't react to it, and nor did it speak, not that I'm even sure it has that capability.

Is it evil to be working for a devil? Or, at least, is it too evil to justify? Clearly it's not a good thing, but... it's worth it, right? We've been banned from this city, the biggest city of Barovia, where we might be trapped for who knows how long. And the city is so clearly rotten to the core: there's vampires, necromantic mages, half-insane burgomasters... and Lady Fiona offered us so much in exchange for helping her.

No, we're doing the right thing here. Helping ourselves well also making the city better for all of its inhabitants - what better action could we possibly take?

Speaking with the Lady Watcher was an exercise in charisma. The entire conversation I felt like we were dancing (or sparring, I'm not quite sure...). We jostled back and forth on the specifics, on whether it was obtainable, but really, it comes down to this:

In exchange for assassinating Izek and embarrassing the burgomaster before removing him from his position for that the title will pass along to Lady Watcher rather than his son, Lady Watcher will gift us with property in the city, her general aid and friendship, gold, and other rewards.

I didn't quite accept this mission on behalf of the others, but I did heavily hint that this should be acceptable, pending speaking with them. And now that we've convinced the others to go ahead with this in the morning... well, we can't really back out now.

After leaving the Watcher house, we made some plans: not very good ones, apparently, since we went back on them almost immediately, but I guess that's how it goes. We sent Emmeral to hide near one of the city gates to help us sneak in over night and went ourselves to the general store to find some disguises for the others.

Ah, I forgot to mention: Elwing had caught up with us, in spider form, somewhere outside the Watcher house, and had listened in on the entire conversation.

I spent far too much gold on hunting outfits, like we'd seen here and there around town, then we headed toward Emmeral's likely hiding spots. Since we had the disguises, there wasn't really any reason to stay hidden within the city.

We left through the eastern gate and looked around for the others: they weren't there.

We headed to the gate we'd entered through that morning: they weren't there.

We headed to the Vistani camp and chatter with Arrigal: they weren't there and Arrigal hadn't heard anything about them passing through after we'd left.

With no idea where they were, we thought about where they'd be likely to go. Since Morianna had been so insistent on heading to the Wizard of Wines winery this morning, we assumed they'd head that direction and so followed along the road toward Kresk.

The Tower of Khazan

Eventually, we noticed some muddy footprints heading off of the road and found them walking slowly toward Lake Baratok. It turns out they, too, had an exciting day; they'd found a bag of clothes off the road that they were confident had been left by a werewolf, perhaps even the werewolf our prophecy had mentioned. They'd left her(?) a note saying to meet at a bridge on the Raven River, near the winery. She'd forgotten to set a timeline for this, so we fixed that; after some discussion we agreed to give ourselves five days to deal with tomorrow's festival, any fallout from that, and anything else unexpected that comes up until then.

The reminds me: today is the "Twelfth Day of the Ninth Moon of the Year 735", as the Barovians keep their calendars. Our plan is to meet on the bridge on the seventeenth.

A few things that worry me about Morianna: as she was filling me in on what they'd been up to, she informed me they'd found a bunch of herbs and set them on fire, then she'd sat and whittled a doll for Arabella. Upon me telling her about our plan to embarrass the burgomaster, assassinate Izek, and help Lady Fiona take control of the city, her only response had been to suggest we set his house on fire.

What is wrong with this woman?

Emmeral had gone to investigate the clothes bag and confirm the werewolf tracks were, indeed, made by a werewolf. Upon his successful confirmation, we decided to head toward Lake Baratok and take a look around before dealing with the Vallaki festival tomorrow. Kinnacia also made a poison out of hemlock to kill the lice we'd gained from our makeshift disguises; we kept her spare dosage and hope it might come in useful tomorrow. The fact that our otherwise unassuming cleric knew to make a poison out of hemlock... should I be worried?

Either way, Elwing and Morianna set off toward the bridge to leave her mark somewhere the werewolf would find it and the rest of us headed off to meet them at the lake. By this point it was about mid-day; we had the afternoon and early evening to explore.

Kinnacia, Emmeral, and I, while walking through the forest, came across a "friendly" traveller (Kaltrin the now-dead werewolf) who warned us of the danger of wolves in this area. He also warned us that werewolves haunted the area.

No kidding.

He gave us an amulet to protect us from these dangers and set us on our way; I cast Detect Magic to determine what sort of protection it would offer, but found it was unenchanted. Casting Identify to learn even more turned up nothing interesting, only that it'd been made by hand. Like fools, we

wished him well and carried on, only for him to ambush us with a few other werewolves on our way out of Van Rikten's tower.

We met up with the others near the lake. Immediately, Morianna insisted the pendant's symbol is the one she's been searching for and asked for the pendant. She's tight-lipped about why she's looking for this symbol, or what she knows, but my best guess is that this is the symbol of the local werewolves. Why would she be looking for a werewolf symbol, though?

Once we arrived at the lake, we found a decrepit tower built on an island in its centre. The island was clearly built specially for the tower, maybe by magic? It was impressive, to say the least. The tower itself? Less so. It was falling to pieces... the golems, on the other hand, were interesting: they responded to thought, controlling the elevator instantly.

Now that would be cool! I wonder how whoever built this tower created the golems? Having a golem or two to protect me... hmmm.

There was originally a Vistani wagon sitting outside the tower but we, uh, broke it. Emmeral picked the lock, and I Mage Handed the door open. So, of course, given our luck, the wagon instantly exploded in a giant fireball that echoed across Barovia.

Yeah, we're bad at this.

Speaking of being bad at this, the door to the tower had an emblem with several stick-figure drawings arrayed around it and the name Khazan written above it. So, us being us, Kinnacia threw a rock at it then ran forward to touch the door, which immediately exploded, catching us all in a field of lightning. Idiot.

Besides the trapped front door, the tower also had a dome of anti-magic. It seemed to both disable magical effects and prevent casting them within it... now that was terrifying. Being unable to cast spells? I could hardly stand it, I was terrified the entire time we were inside.

Given the front door was trying to kill us, we decided to walk around to find a different way in; some half-broken wood scaffolding leading up to a window worked for that. Well, sort of worked: Morianna climbed in the window on the third floor and we immediately heard two thumps as she fell through both floors to the main floor. Again, we're not very good at this.

Either way, she opened the door for us and we explored the tower. This is where we found the golems; four of them standing around an elevator platform in the centre of the tower. The elevator was controlled by our very thoughts; now that's something incredible - can you imagine being able to pre-cast spells and let them respond to my thoughts? Imagine preparing an area with hundreds of Firebolts, all ready to fire at my command! So long as I had some time to prepare, I'd be ready for anything!

I wonder if there's anywhere I could find someone who knows how to do this? Maybe this Van Rikten person can teach me.

Anyway, Emmeral, Morianna, and I headed up to the top of the tower, which was furnished. It either belonged to Strahd, or Van Rikten, or maybe Khazan is a person, or... I don't know, I don't think we can be sure. There was a portrait on the wall of Strahd and a younger male that appeared to be him, who we think might be Van Rikten, unless Van Rikten is an alias for Strahd, but... gah! I can hardly keep it straight.

Alright, one at a time:

- we found a suit of armor that wouldn't budge, which - given that tower - was probably because it was enchanted to attack us on command or something like that.
- a chest in the corner contained a dead Vistani head and a lavender-scented bottle. Likely, the Vistani head belonged to the Vistani mentioned in the memoirs. The lavender solution (which I took, just in case) appeared to be for embalming.
- a few pages of Van Rikten's journal, which Emmeral read to us. Let's see what I remember of that: Three decades of investigating to expose creatures of darkness. Van Rikten was a hero, sage, and master hunter. He survived supernatural assaults and was obsessive about a vampire that killed his kid, so he became bleak over the "weight of time". The man lived too long and either was, or was like, a lich bound to existence, to endure forever. He wanted to die, but didn't think he will. He thought we wouldn't be considered a hero for long, since he was alright with being the indirect cause of many deaths. He was the target of a Vistani curse but hadn't born the brunt of it, rather his friends were. His child (Arasimus) was taken by the Vistani and sold to vampires; Van Rikten stalked the vampire down and killed him, then tracked down the Vistani and tortured them for information. The Vistani didn't kidnap his child in secret, mind, but Van Rikten couldn't save a sick Vistani that he promised he could save and offered them "anything he owns" to make them feel better. After an hour, he realized they took his son. On his horse, he took the dead Vistani and followed. When he decided to avoid camping at night, he was set upon by the undead - a lich intervened to spare him, though. Lich detected him, took control of the zombies, warded him against undead, animated a dead Vistani to lead to camp. He found the Vistani camp, the dead still following him, threatened the zombies upon the Vistani, but they said they sold the son to Baron Mateuse. He released the zombies to kill the group. The leader of the Vistani cursed him to "live you always among monsters and see everyone you love die under their claws". He found Arasimus later, but as a vampire who wanted to die, so he killed his son. He thought the curse was done then, but it wasn't and he got angry.
- a map of the area with a bunch of places marked off. Mostly places we already had heard of, but getting an exact location was exciting.
- a portrait of Strahd and a younger man that looked very similar to him.

So, either Van Rikten is Strahd, way in his younger days, before he actually became a vampire, or Van Rikten is Strahd's... younger brother, maybe? Either way, somehow they are definitely related. As for Khazan... maybe it's Strahd/Van Rikten's younger brother's name? Another alias? Someone else, who built the tower before Van Rikten took it over? Not even a name at all?

Kinnacia found "Van Rikten's Guide to Vampires" in the wreckage of the wagon outside, which definitely makes me believe Van Rikten was a vampire hunter at some point. If his journal isn't accurate, he at least put in the effort to make it seem like it is.

I've attempted to say Khazan as a spell, with magic swirling inside me, but nothing happened. Maybe it's not a spell, or it is, but it only works near the tower? It may be worth going back there at some point, it could be a safe haven when we need one.

On our way out of the tower, we were intercepted by werewolves who wanted to kill us and steal our supplies, one of them being the guy we'd seen along the road earlier.

Now at this point, I put to use the knowledge of magic that I gained last night to amazing effect. I was definitely right, reading through this spellbook has increased my magic by leaps and bounds.

Immediately, I let the magic flowing through me burst out, casting two Firebolts at once - one from each hand. The closest two wolves positively exploded in flames, my magic incinerating them to the core. This burst of magic, though... I have no idea how, but the others told me later that I turned into a potted plant.

A potted plant.

I just... I just. What?

I have no words.

When I... came back to myself... Morianna was laying swordless near me and Kinnacia looked half-dead... basically, without my magic they got completely demolished.

My magic was particularly active after that, I could barely believe what I could do. Immediately, I spun toward the three werewolves and cast a Firebolt at one with one hand and Hold Person on the other two with the other. Holding two of our opponents still with only a single hand, the others dove in and killed most of the small wolves. The third one, though, they completely ignored until it dove on me and bit at my arm.

The bite was enough to make me lose my concentration, allowing the other werewolves to finally start attacking us.

Morianna knocked him away after he bit me, but the damage was done: the other werewolves dove at Elwing and Emmeral. I cast Magic Weapon on both of Emmeral's swords to give him an edge against the werewolf that was slashing at him and Fire Bolted the one that bit me, all within seconds. The amount of magic I've been able to output lately and so quickly...

Emmeral, in usual fashion, tore through the werewolves once he had a second to catch his breath. Elwing, too, made a great showing; somehow he'd learned to Call Lightning to strike at our enemies... pretty impressive. Not quite as impressive as my command on magic, lately, but... well, we can't all understand the intricacies of magic quite like I've been learning to.

Well, sort of.

The fight eventually ended - after I had another couple chances to demolish the werewolves with a flurry of spells - with the lead werewolf running away in fear after we'd knocked down his last surviving companion. Emmeral charged after him, killing him before he could escape, and we turned to the wolf that we'd knocked down.

I tried to intimidate him into talking, infusing my voice with my magic, and somehow ended up with a third eye on my head.

At this point, I just... it's not that I'm losing control of my magic - far from it, I have more power now than ever before - but... well, I need to spend more time meditating about this.

We tied up the wolf and spent some time calming ourselves down after the fight and having Kinnacia patch us up. I sat for a while to think about how my magic was changing, but really didn't get anywhere with it. After I finish updating this journal, I'll spend some more time... I definitely need to get this more under control before anything bad happens.

That reminds me; Kinnacia ate an entire wolf while we were sitting around and collecting ourselves. I have no idea how to react to that.

After we'd rested up a bit, we started interrogating our prisoner.

Why did the wolves attack us? It looked like we had equipment to steal.

What does the symbol on the necklace mean? Nothing, it's just their clan symbol. Morianna was insistent on asking this, though she refused to tell us why, and seemed confused and disappointed at this answer. That woman... she only gets more and more suspicious as time goes on.

What happens now? The beta will be in charge, since we just killed the alpha (oops).

Where is their den? They have a cave across the lake to the west.

What's in the den? A bunch of children that they're planning on turning into werewolves at some point.

How does one become a werewolf? Get bitten and wait about a day. As far as the werewolf knew, there's no way to prevent it, though maybe a priest would know more.

How many packs are around here? Only the one, which covers the entire area west of Vallaki.

Are the wolves transformed werewolves? No, just pets.

Do the werewolves like Strahd? Yeah, they're generally a fan. At this point, Kinnacia butted in to ask specifically whether the werewolf "knows anyone of them that doesn't like him, maybe a woman?"... talk about making it blatantly obvious. Either way, the werewolf pretended to have no idea what she was talking about though eventually folded and told us the new beta ("Zallika") was always against both the former-alpha and Strahd.

Whose clothes were in the bag? Could be anyone's.

At this point, we pretty much started yelling at each other about what to do next and why. The werewolf took the opportunity to start slinking away, so Emmeral stabbed him. This, of course, caused even more arguing... I swear we spent nearly an hour yelling back and forth.

It's a nightmare, really, it's like we have no common goals but somehow we're working together... well, sort of. I have no idea why we're even staying together... I guess we're all pretty confident we'd die on our own in this Labelas-forsaken place. In retrospect, that's a pretty good reason to stick together.

Eventually, we settled on a course of action: Emmeral skinned the alpha's pelt in case we needed future proof, we threw the rest of the wolves into the lake, we headed back to the Vistani camp, and we planned to get the priest to de-curse us in Vallaki the next day.

We're turning in early so we'll be well-rested for our city invasion over night. The plan is to head out around two or three in the morning. I'm so restless I'm not sure I'll be able to properly trance tonight... I just hope our plans work as well as we're hoping.

The Vallaki Coup

Around three, we set out toward Vallaki. We walked through the treelines so we'd come at it from the north, the plan being to climb over the city wall behind the church and talk with Brother Petrovich about de-wolfing us.

Along the way, we came across a recently dug up grave that looked as if someone had burst out of it. We mostly ignored it, assuming it was nothing that concerned us, which ended up being our first mistake. Don't worry, we made more.

After using an improvised grappling hook Emmeral had fashioned to climb over the wall, we headed toward the church. The four dug up graves in the church's graveyard were our second ignored hint of what was to come.

Sometimes, we can be really dense.

We walked around the church until we saw Brother Petrovich sleeping through one of the windows. A few hurried Messages were enough to convince him to let us in, though I nearly gave him a heart attack I'm sure.

Fortunately, his gods were friendly. We informed him about the werewolf bites and he led us through a prayer to his gods over the next couple hours. At the end of it, my Detect Magic showed a glowing, purple mass of transmutation magic swirling around my heart (but no one else's). Kinnacia called on her gods to Remove Curse from me and we were good to go.

Kinnacia didn't have the power to Remove Curse from all of us, if the priest hadn't been able to narrow down which of us were cursed... I don't know what I would do as a werewolf. Losing my mind to become a slobbering beast once every moon is not something I've ever wanted for myself.

Anyway, the priest seemed very worried about the graves being dug up. Remember those mistakes I mentioned? I told him the graves were why we were here and we would definitely look into the problem for him.

Yes, I lied.

Yes, that was a bad idea.

Heading out from there, we began with our mission: we sent Elwing (as a spider) to investigate the burgomaster's house, searching for Izek. He returned about an hour later with some news:

- the dungeon was completely empty
- the sticks bundled around the house were gone, likely as kindling for the festival
- Izek was in his room with countless dolls that were carved to look like Irena, sharpening his axe
- oh and did I mention Irena was nowhere to be found?
- the burgomaster and his wife were asleep though, as were the servants, so only Irena was missing
- the broken mirror had been fixed or replaced

- Viktor (at first we weren't sure since we hadn't yet seen his face, but we were right) was frantically searching for a book in the library

Emmeral suggested we try to get Viktor on our side and help us make a fool out of the burgomaster, but we all agreed he likely hated us too much. I mean, he certainly seemed angry when he nearly killed us twice...

We left Emmeral to keep watch on Izek and headed toward the toymaker's shop, since we figured he must have gotten those toys from somewhere and this was the most likely place that we knew of. We were right.

Before we got to the shop, a large cloud of ravens seemed to be explicitly watching us. I need to remember to look into that. Maybe Strahd can see through the ravens' eyes?

The toymaker's shop had a sign on it: it opened at eight and would be closed midday for the festival. That gave us a much-needed hour to break in and prepare. A bit of slipperiness from our sneaky friend Emmeral and we were inside.

The shop was... pretty normal really, other than the Irena doll against one wall that was marked "not for sale".

With no hidden letter detailing exactly what was going on, we decided to interrogate the toymaker. And you know what? I honestly thought this would go well. We grabbed the toymaker (and his monkey, who Elwing has been obsessed with ever since), figured out from him that Izek was coming right at eight for the new doll (which he had the toymaker make a new one of every day until he got it "right"), and set a trap.

Having convinced the toymaker that Izek was planning some secret scheme to hurt the burgomaster (I know, I thought it was quite brilliant), the toymaker agreed to let me impersonate him so we can lure in Izek with one condition: that we not let any damage come to the toymaker's shop, especially since Izek kept threatening to burn it down.

Yeah, I know. Just... not everything can go as planned, alright?

We sent Morianna to get Emmeral and set about planning: I used Disguise Self and put on a set of the toymaker's clothing, making myself look and sound like the toymaker, and we planned out exactly what would happen. I would have the doll on the counter, which I would stand behind, and I'd convince Izek to walk toward the center of the room. As he reached the point where all the toymaker's shelves meet, I would Hold Person him in place and the others would jump out from all sides. We didn't want to take any chances, the goal was to kill him as quickly as possible.

Honestly, the plan initially went off without a hitch. I lured him forward, he walked through the shop toward me, he didn't seem to have any idea whatsoever that I was in disguise. We jumped out at him and hurt him really badly for he could really attack us.

With a giant magical battleaxe, I might add. I wish I could have recovered that...

Eventually, he cast a Fireball into the middle of the room. Yeah, as in the first floor of the shop we'd promised not to set on fire. Also, right into the middle of all of us.

The shop got set on fire.

In fact, the shop completely burned down.

We chased down Izek and had Emmeral kill him (he exploded, by the way. Exploded! Why would that even happen?) while Elwing ran into the burning building to save the toymaker.

He's a brave one, I have to admit. But not the brightest; he couldn't figure out a way to save the too-fat-too-carry toymaker out of the building and he - as Elwing tearfully recounted later - died in Elwing's arms. He did save the monkey, though.

With Izek dead, we didn't have much time to catch our breaths. The toymaker's shop being set on fire attracted the attention of... well, of pretty much everyone. The others ran off to continue with the plan, while I stayed to continue the role of the toymaker and try to spread my story (that the burgomaster was in danger from folks like Izek that he'd stupidly put his trust in. Makes him sound pretty incompetent, no?)

I convinced the people standing around that I was really the toymaker and that there was a plot against the burgomaster. That the brave and helpful adventurers were on the burgomaster's side and that all would be well. And, also, that they should help me put the fire out.

We tossed water onto the still burning building for a while, all while I continued to pass along the rumor. None of them seemed willing to listen too much, but I assumed at the time that was due to the giant fire in the middle of their village.

One of these days, I hope I'll learn to make better assumptions.

Eventually, some guards arrived and I passed the story to them; I explained that Izek had caused the fire, that the helpful adventurers had gone north (they'd gone southeast), and that they were working to help the burgomaster against a dastardly plot. They insisted that Izek couldn't have caused the damage, but I simply shrugged and insisted I could only share what I'd been told and seen with my own eyes.

They asked me to come with them, to speak with the burgomaster, but I asked I be allowed to put the fire out first (and slip away when they weren't looking...). Turns out they weren't really asking and went to put me in handcuffs.

I couldn't really allow that, given most of my magic only works when I use hand motions (note to self: figure out exactly what I can do with and without hand motions, so I can definitively know whether I can escape from handcuffs and such), so I Misty Stepped myself through an open window in the inn and hid in the dark room there for a while.

Eventually, I Disguise Self'd myself as one of the citizens I'd seen around town and walked out without any of them being the wiser.

It was pretty cool, if I do say so myself. I can see why Emmeral likes sneaking around so much, it's... thrilling... to completely fool people.

On my way out of the inn, I saw Rictavio leaving the inn and carrying a steak and followed him. He led the way to his caravan to feed the tiger, which - surprisingly - seemed completely tame. This may make our plan to release it a bit harder - if it's tame, then it might not scare anyone. We might need to set it off somehow, make it angry.

That reminds me, I haven't written down our plan yet. I guess I'll get to it eventually, but the gist of it is to release the tiger during the festival and cause a bunch of other chaos, mostly to show the people that the burgomaster has no control over the city. The details were... less set in stone, but we were working on it.

I made my way back toward the toymaker's shop once it became clear that Rictavio was simply spending his time chatting with his tiger. I did consider speaking with him and trying to get him

on our side, and in retrospect that would have been a great idea, but I thought he'd be unwilling to let us use his tiger as bait and ruin our plan.

Yes, yes, big mistake, I know.

Along the way back, I passed through city square, where I saw Morianna working alongside a villager, helping to set up a stage. She gestured toward an alley, where Kinnacia was hiding.

Kinnacia informed me of their efforts so far, few as they were. In the time I'd spent putting out a fire, spreading the rumor, escaping from guards, and tracking down Rictavio's tiger, they'd defaced a few signs and were mostly hiding around the stage in preparation for midday, when the festival would actually begin.

I sent a Message to Emmeral asking if he had any better ideas, since, mostly, Kinnacia's plan was useless, but guards started patrolling the area and he had to hide under the stage. I sent a final "I'll be back" and went off to continue spreading the rumors. In the meantime, I later found out that Emmeral had put some damage into the stage to help cause chaos later. The first useful thing they did, I knew I could count on Emmeral.

Anyway, I spent a while walking around town, trying to convince the villagers of my story and spread the rumor. Gradually, I realized something was up: every single villager was completely uninterested in what I had to say at best and was terrified of hearing the rumors at worst. Eventually, though, I ran into some hunters and got a different conversation entirely.

They completely ignored my story and instead focused on me. "Why do you talk so much?" they asked, and I could see their thoughts churning. "People from around here don't talk much."

Which, you know, made me want to slap myself. Of course the people around here didn't want to hear any rumors, none of them were used to rumor-spreading at all since they never talk to each other. Which is weird for a whole different reason, but at this point I wasn't going to go down that rabbit-hole.

I'm not going to say it this time. I know what I should have done instead, I'll leave it at that.

The hunters were convinced of my act as soon as I told them I was from Kresk and I headed back to Rictavio's wagon to chat with him - I know what I'd thought earlier, but at this point I thought maybe he could help me share the story.

Along the way, I noticed Emmeral entering the coffin maker's shop and followed him in. The others updated me of their progress: Morianna had noticed a suspicious man entering a shop in town square with a large bag and leaving without it and had stolen some nails when she entered after him. She handed me some, which I threw into my bag with some confusion.

Emmeral had taken the hubcap off of Rictavio's wagon, then put it back on when he realized it needed to get all the way to town square before we wanted to release the tiger. Which, you know, should have been obvious. Maybe my faith in him is somewhat misplaced.

I shared my findings with the group, that no one in town was convinceable. To which Kinnacia immediately suggested we kill them all. I cast Detect Magic to find out what mind-altering spell she was the victim of, but she came up clean. Something is seriously wrong with that dwarf and I'm terrified of when it will bite us in the back. No one else seemed to find her suggestion out-of-character.

We headed back to the town square around eleven, in time to watch the festivities. Eventually, the burgomaster appeared in a procession: his wife, son (we confirmed this soon), dogs, a bunch of kids dressed as flowers, and a bunch of villagers carrying a large wicker ball.

They entered town square, where the entire village was waiting, with all the pomp they could muster. The burgomaster walked onstage and turned to address the crowd... and promptly fell into the hole Emmeral had prepared.

Absolute silence for about five seconds, the entire town was quiet. Then, I had a brilliant idea and used Prestidigitatioⁿ to make it sound like one member of the crowd had let out a single loud "Ha!".

More silence, this time shocked. Guards ran forward to lift him out of the hole. The burgomaster was fuming; so, of course, I used my magic to turn him the slightest shade of red and make steam billow from his ears. His wife giggled and Viktor smirked. The burgomaster shouted at the crowd to go back to their merriment and turned to his guards, which immediately split off in all directions, presumably looking for me.

We ask Kinnacia to give us a prediction as to the outcome of releasing the tiger now, since she informed us her gods would help guide us. Their response?

Releasing the tiger would be "good and bad".

...

This is why I'm not a cleric.

Soon, Octavio's wagon showed up and the burgomaster began to get ready for what was clearly the main event. He lit a torch and began to walk solemnly toward the wicker ball. So, of course, I Prestidigitatⁱed the flames out. The burgomaster smiled thinly at the crowd and tried again, so I repeated my action.

This time, real laughter came from the crowd, from an actual villager, without me having to use my magic. My hero! I joined in with some (Prestidigitized) laughter of my own and the entire crowd soon started actually chuckling. The burgomaster begins ranting at the crowd, but the atmosphere was exactly right to deal the final blow to the crowd's confidence in him.

I sent Elwing a Messageto do his part in the plan, to release the tiger.

He sent back "no".

It would have worked as we wanted, the remaining guards would have been in place to subdue the tiger. No one would have been hurt, we just would have made a fool out of the burgomaster.

But Elwing said no.

At the last moment, he choked up and refused to do as we planned. And he's refused to explain his reasoning since then, insisting that the plan would have gone off badly even if he'd released the tiger on time.

That's when everything went to hell.

The burgomaster stepped forward during his rant and saw Morianna out of the corner of his eye. Immediately, he sent the remaining guards toward us. All of them, every single one, including the ones we'd been counting on to keep the tiger from actually causing damage.

I tripped the burgomaster on his way down the stairs and we bolted, all in different directions. Most importantly, Emmeral ran toward the tiger's caravan to try to keep the plan intact.

He succeeded, I guess.

I mean, in the end, our end goal was... technically, we succeeded, but...

The tiger leapt from its cage and scared the crowd, who was already calling out about the burgomaster's incompetence. At first, we thought we'd succeeded as planned, that Lady Watcher could step in now and fix the problem.

Sometimes, we can be really, really, really dense.

The tiger spotted the burgomaster's wife and something about her enticed it. It stalked toward her singlemindedly, pawing through the cloud without a single glance. When it got within range...

The tiger pounced at her and mauled her. It tore her to shreds, even with Viktor Disintegrating it almost immediately.

Dictavio tried to stop it, but he just couldn't. The tiger was too fast. No one was expecting it.

We sprinted away from there, heading toward the Watcher house as quickly as we could. The screaming of the crowd behind us only escalated, lightning flashed all around, the rising sound of undead groans...

We ran and we ran and we didn't look back.

At this point, I don't think any of us were thinking straight. We'd just killed a woman, not directly, I know, but she was innocent. And besides that, the screams behind us... we knew something terrible was happening and we were powerless to stop it. Labelas, we didn't even know what was really going on.

At this point, I don't think any of us were prepared for what came next.

We arrived back at the Watcher house and were greeted with open arms. "Welcome, friends, I can tell all is well." is literally how she greeted us, with a smirk as she glanced at Elwing: "not a spider this time, I see?". I was too shocked to respond - not shocked that she'd known, shocked at what had just happened - but she simply led us to the main dining room, an incredibly extravagant room which simply oozed riches.

She snapped for a servant, which was just enough to snap me out of my daze.

She asked us how things went and I dutifully informed her of our success in terrifying the burgomaster, in killing Izek. She thought the entire affair marvelous and informed us that she never really wanted to be the burgomaster to begin with. That she was simply working for a better cause.

That was when Strahd stepped into the room.

~~I still can't wrap my head around~~

I felt confused when I saw Strahd, at first, until the enormity of what we'd done set in. We'd taken the city for Strahd, we'd done exactly what he'd wanted us to do, we'd...

He had been playing us, the whole time. And the worst part of that, is I'm still not entirely sure it was a bad thing. I mean, yes, clearly he's evil at this point, right? But that what we learned later...

Well, I don't want to get my thoughts out of order here. Just before Arabella's next prophecy, though... well, you'll see. That's when it started to make sense in my head. Not much sense, I'm still a bit out-of-sorts, but... again, we'll get there.

These people, the people in Barovia, or at least most of them, they're soul-less. They're nothing but constructs, they live and breathe sure, but not really. They don't really live, they don't have emotions, they don't have hopes and dreams and, and, and what does it even mean, to kill them? Are they really people? Is it more like killing an animal, or maybe it's even less than that? I don't know.

I really don't know.

~~But if Strahd kills people like this, does that make him evil? It's the obvious thought when you see someone cause devastation on such a large scale, but if they're soul-less... I just~~

Does it count? Does killing soul-less people count as murder? I'm not the most moral person in the world, I never strived to be some white knight hero, I fully admit that, but being the cause of so many deaths?

If they're people, then I can't stand what we did. If they were normal people with souls and lives and personalities I would be... I don't know what I'd be, but I wouldn't be able to continue as I have been, not really acting against Strahd, not really on his side. If they were people, my decision would be easy; I'd use this book to work against Strahd, to destroy him, to make him pay for what he's done. I need. I want to know what he knows, to learn all about the magic that courses through my veins, to walk the world for an eternity, learning more about my magic.

But to trade the deaths of hundreds, of more than that... I can't do that. I don't want to do that.

He'd played us. He'd used us as pawns, made us do exactly what he wanted. Maybe this was why we were in Barovia, to be his playthings, to give him exactly what he wants.

I

We're going to work against him.

We're going to fight against Strahd. And I'm not giving up the hope that I can get everything I want out of him first, but that comes second. I've already learned so much from this adventure... there will be other ways to get what I want. This way... this is not alright.

Of course, with Strahd standing right in front of me, and without the knowledge that the people were soul-less, all I could do was fall back on talk.

"Thank you," he spoke grandly, without any thought that we were anything but perfectly in his grasp. We were, though, so really he was simply speaking accurately. "The five of you are very effective. You've done me a great service today, giving me Vallaki, not to mention you've found my enemy for me."

"Not at all," I responded, the sickness of speaking with him pushed down into my gut. "We were happy to be of assistance. And what will you do now that Vallaki is yours?"

"Oh, but I have great plans! Wonderful plans! I can keep the zombies fed, I can spread my vampiric offspring all across the land... it's truly a marvelous thing we've done. Why, you've even managed to break Viktor's ties to his mother - the brat was always a bit too clingy for his own good. Simply wonderful." At this he looked at me shrewdly. "Though this may not be the end of your... play-fighting with Viktor. I only have the time to take on a single apprentice, after all."

Great to have that out in the open, where the others can see my temptation. It's been 'absolutely marvelous' to have to deal with a Dwarf concerned I'm falling into darkness all evening.

At his comment, I smirked and tipped my head, ever playing the showman for him. Maybe that's why Kinnacia is so convinced I'll be trying to go kill Viktor? Not that I wouldn't mind gaining access to his spellbook...or getting some payback for him nearly killing me twice...or having Strahd absolutely convinced I was his underling and willing to teach me all of his arcane talents...

Alright, I can understand why she's so worried about me.

And maybe I can get all that I want out of him, but killing Viktor in cold blood to become Strahd's apprentice and simply pretend all of this is alright? I can't do that.

"As a reward, you may have the Petrovich house. Viktor's lab, of course, has already been moved to Castle Ravenloft. While we're on that topic, I'd like to invite you to my wedding in four days time. No gifts are required, of course, simply your presence in watching me wed the lovely Irena."

Yeah, that's where Irena is.

With that, Strahd left us - presumably to prepare for his upcoming nuptials. For a few moments, each of us were stuck in a trance, processing what we'd just heard. Lady Watcher snapped out of it first, to congratulate us once again and lead us out. As a parting question, I asked her who would lead the guards now, hoping for a few potential new allies. Her response was less than helpful.

"Don't worry, they'll be dealt with."

I am, in fact, worried about it.

We wandered aimlessly for a time, only coming back to our senses as we watched a zombie tearing chunks from a fresh corpse. I'm not sure who said it first, but for once we were in complete agreement with each other: "we should find Dictavio". Maybe it was that he was our only real ally in the city, maybe it was because we felt bad about using his pet as the engine of the destruction of the city. Maybe we just needed something straightforward to focus on.

Whatever our reasons, we were set on our goal. As one we raced back toward town square, killing a few scraggling zombies along the way and avoiding the larger hordes. I hardly remember stopping, only running past them and killing with barely a thought, my magic flowing around me.

Eventually, Elwing thinks to Locate Monkey and we re-oriented back toward the church. We find no monkey there, but we do find barricaded doors and windows. A knock from Morianna terrifies the people inside, but Brother Petrovich opened the door a crack to speak with us. He informed us that they were barricading and praying. We wanted to take them with us, we tried our best to be convincing, but they refused - the church was pretty much the safest place in this entire Labeledas-forsaken country. We couldn't really argue with that one, especially now that they had the protective bones back once more.

I hope they're alright in there.

Eventually, we decided to leave them behind and follow the monkey tracks that Emmeral had discovered during our talk. They led almost directly to the - now undefended - West Gate of Vallaki...more specifically, they led directly to a zombie standing in the middle of the path, leaning on a cane, and wiping dirt from its jacket.

We paused for all of a second before Morianna burst out a greeting: "Hey Dictavio!"

He turned to face us in fear, brandishing his cane to reveal a hidden sword. Our conversation with him was not very useful; it pretty much went like this:

"What have you done to this city!?"

"Yeah, sorry about that. We didn't mean it."

"Well now I have to hide from my enemy."

"Yeah, Strahd knows you're here."

"No kidding. Thanks for that, by the way."

"Our bad. Also he's marrying Trena."

"Yeah, that makes sense. She's the reincarnation of his long lost love, so that was pretty much bound to happen."

"Wow, we did not know that. Can we help you out at all?"

"No, you've done enough. You've ruined everything and I've lost every advantage I had. Now I need to disappear."

"Wait, does this mean you know how to leave Barovia?"

"No, of course not. But I do have some places within Barovia that I can go." he sighed a bit here and pushed Piccolo toward us. "You there, druid, take Piccolo, he won't be safe with me."

"Can we help you fight Strahd?"

"Fight Strahd? I'm not fighting him, I'm running from him! If he finds me, I'm dead. Look, I need to leave. I might be in touch if I can manage it safely. Try not to make things even worse while I'm gone."

I may have summarized what he said a bit, but the tone was there. Normally I'd take offence to being spoken to so rudely, but...well, I can't say we don't deserve it.

With that, he disappeared. So much for that ally.

Speaking of allies, though, we decided to head toward the Vallaki camp.

We headed out to the Vistani camp, hoping that they hadn't been attacked by the undead army. They'd been more than friendly to us, maybe we could even convince them to take up arms against Strahd! It would be nice to have someone on our side, for once.

The Vallaki Camp's Party

The Vistani were partying, celebrating "our success in Vallaki".

"Lovely, that was our goal," I sighed back. I'm getting tired of having to lie to pretty much everyone we come across, just so they don't know they're our enemies.

Apparently the Vistani have always been supporters of Strahd, we even got a history lesson out of the deal: apparently, years and years ago Strahd had led an army to capture this country. He had fallen in the fight, but the Vistani had saved him, earning them pretty much eternal gratefulness. Now that he's all-powerful, the Vistani are more than happy to continue serving him in exchange for special favours.

Like protection from all of Strahd's evil, apparently the Vistani are completely safe from all of Strahd's schemes, from all of the zombies, from vampires, from ghouls, from pretty much everything terrible about this country.

Lucky kuu'dattora.

As Kinnaica began a drinking competition once again to help loosen their tongues, we asked a few more questions: we finally had a chance to ask about 'a vampire named Arasimus', but they had no idea what we meant. They directed us to 'Madam Eva' - the oldest living Vistani - in the Barovian Vistani camp when we requested to speak with the wisest person in the country. They informed us that they happily worked for Strahd by running expeditions beyond the borders - though they could only leave with his special permission - and taking care of "distasteful" elements of society at Lady Watcher's request.

The whole thing left me feeling a bit slimy, but at least we got some horses out of the deal. Apparently Strahd had lavished them with gifts in celebration of our victory and they had more than enough horses to spare one for each of us. It'll help us run away in fear somewhat faster, at least.

As Kinnaica drank, Morianna stayed with her and Elwing went off on his own. Emerald and I planned our next moves - at this point, I think we understand each other pretty well. Neither of us was alright with what had happened; we needed to know how to put an end to this. We agreed to set out to the Wizards of Wine winery at first chance, searching for the knowledge promised to us in Arabella's prophecy.

In her first prophecy, that is. I told you I'd get to this, didn't I?

We had just spotted Elwing having a conversation with a Dusk Elf and were about to join him when Arabella peaked her head out from behind a wagon and gestured us over to her.

"What do you know about Madam Eva?" she asked us, getting immediately to the point. "It doesn't matter - look, Strahd brought you here with some plan. He made you meet the wolf-touched. He knows your actions before even you do. How, you ask? Madam Eva tells him. She's a psychic, a prophet like me, and she's very much on Strahd's side. I hate him, though, since he keeps the soul-less trapped here."

"We're in a demi-plane, trapped in a pocket dimension of Strahd's domain. Most of the villagers here are hardly even real people, since there aren't enough souls to go around. I just want to see him defeated so those souls can move on."

"There's a book you need to seek out, at the Wizards of Wine winery. So long as you hold that little piece of Strahd's past, he can't have Madam Eva see your actions - he can't have anyone sery your actions. You need to get that first, to have any chance of maneuvering without his knowledge."

Arabella blinked a few times after that, screwed up her eyes in concentration, and then burst into a trance to deliver a second prophecy: "The wolf-touched has gone to resolve her past". She recovered pretty easily from this one - and even explained that she'd done it on purpose.

"True prophecies will confuse Madam Eva's sight. You have several hours where she will be completely unable to predict you, I suggest you make the most of the time. Strahd will notice the hole in her predictions, though. He'll know I'm involved. I need to leave this place, but I have faith in you."

Isn't that nice, she has faith in us. Despite the fact that we'd found and lost our second ally in as many hours, I couldn't help but feel somewhat optimistic about the whole thing. We're

trapped in a demi-plane, under control by a vampire that wants nothing more than a world full of suffering... but we can fight back. With enough power, we can defeat him and unravel this entire plane. We can save... everyone. That's a pretty great thought.

Except for the part about how the "wolf-touched" has gone to resolve her past". It took us a bit of searching, but eventually we realized: Kinnacia and Morianna had slipped away with their horses.

They'd better hope they left for a damn good reason.

We met up with Elwing and the three of us tried to decide what to do; I say try because we could hardly make up our minds. We needed to go after the book to remain hidden from his powers, but without the girls we would have an even more difficult time if there were any obstacles in our way at the winery - and we're pretty sure there will be, since that seems to be how this country works. According to Elwing, every Dusk Elf hates Strahd and they both know where his power source is and are willing to bring us to it - we seriously considered beelining it straight there, but we're pretty sure the defences there would overwhelm us. Better to be invisible to Strahd, first.

After far too long spent arguing, we decided to head first for Morianna and Kinnacia and then head to the winery immediately thereafter. We grabbed some horses and a wagon from the Vistani and set off, only pausing to let Elwing inform his new Elven friend (we have an ally that hasn't left us yet! I'm so happy) that we'd return soon.

As we head toward the wolves' den, I can't help but wonder: did we make the right decision, going blindly after a Dwarf and a Human that had just abandoned us without a word rather than take our chances with a smaller group at the winery?

Well, I'm not sure we can trust them not to run off again, but they seem happy to help us find Strahd's book, at least.

We travelled toward the general area we knew the wolf den to be; at first, we thought we'd have to search carefully to find it, but it turns out they marked their cave with a giant stone wolf head. Subtle, these werewolves.

As we approached the cave, we began to make out a few figures: Kinnacia and Morianna outside the cave and an old man and a young woman within the cave, surrounded by wolves. The woman darted toward Morianna, as if to attack, but stopped a foot away. We couldn't make out most of the conversation from how far away we stood, but as far as I understand it the woman was the new alpha to the werewolves now that we'd, uh, gotten rid of the previous one.

Morianna asked her why the werewolves "attacked that house that night", which I assume means I missed some context there, and was told that "he told them to kill everyone, but spare the girl". And that now "he has something precious of mine, so we can't act against Strahd". That was my first clue as to the context, by the way. Sounds like Strahd sent the werewolves to attack Morianna's family? I wonder why he would do that.

Morianna offered our help in retrieving whatever precious thing the alpha was referring to in exchange for the werewolves' help in fighting Strahd. The alpha seemed to have tentatively agreed, but only if we can rescue her mate "Amil" from Strahd's dungeon.

Yeah, we'll have to break into Strahd's castle once just to get help breaking into his castle.

I hate this place.

Anyway, the werewolf (who Morianna referred to as "Salika") gave Morianna a whistle to identify us to Amil and sent us on our way. We ushered them back to our wagon, told them about Arabelle's latest prophecy, and are now riding onward to the Wizard of Wines winery. Here's hoping this goes smoothly.