

I can't program and I ain't British.

Happy New Year's Day ladies and gentlemen! A day later than it should have been, but here is the next chapter. I am uploading it here tonight, and will wait until the weekend to post it over on fanfic. It isn't as polished as I would like, and I am still playing around with the colors of the various stats and Gamer elements (only visible if you read a download version). But I hope you like it, and as always, if you guys point out mistakes (or just want to convince me I've done something wrong) please comment, and I will either make corrections or we can talk about it.

Chapter 14: Random Encounters and Romance(?)

While Harry had assigned the two members of the party most suited to figuring out the cypher to work on it together, he had neglected to think of one specific thing: personalities. While Jaheira and Edwin were both levelheaded enough not to come to blows (or the wizard equivalent), they certainly did not get along well enough without anyone else around to willingly work together on the project.

Luckily, Jaheira recognized this almost as soon as the others had left and took steps to both progress in the project and stop herself from gutting the Thayan. "If you can copy out those strange notes, I will remain here and work on one set, and you can either go upstairs to another room, or go wherever you wish to work on them yourself. We do not need to collaborate on this to make progress, I think."

Edwin scoffed, as if the very idea he needed any help at all on something so plebian was beneath him. But he nodded even as he attempted to get a dig in. "I would've thought that as a Harper, you would prefer your own handwriting to even my excellent penmanship, but if you think you cannot measure up, fine."

Soon enough Edwin was finished, and left Jaheira in the house to herself, intending on heading to a tavern to purchase some wine. After walking around the town, he found himself sitting in the main room of Feldepost's Inn. It was the most upscale establishment, with easily the best rooms to rent in the town. Edwin was annoyed to find that currently, it's clientele were not nearly as select as normal.

Still, that meant he could buy several bottles of Berduskan Dark Wine alone with some bits of nibbles. The wine was chilled, of course, he was not a barbarian like the majority of people around here. He glared sideways at a group of locals being incredibly rowdy despite it being only midafternoon. *Ugh, drunk peasants, drowning the knowledge of their weakness in ale and strong spirits. Only thing worse is rioting serfs. And here I am, on the Sword Coast instead of Thay, where the authorities know how to rule, and have the discipline staffs to do it.* While Edwin quite approved of the amount of freedom he had away from Thay, he didn't think just anyone should have such.

Despite the noise, the wine at least was palatable when he took a taste sip at the bar. Nodding in appreciation of that, Edwin settled into a seat in the corner of the main room and then spread his current work in front of him. This included the rubbing Minsc had made of the strange markings on the Iron Key Harry had found. The rest were a sheaf of parchments which had originally been copied out of the journal that the two spawns of Bhaal had found in Tranzig's mansion.

Next to this were Edwin's own notes about the Blood Magic spells he had seen the pair use. Edwin felt he was somewhat close to figuring out how to recreate some of the spells that Harry and Imoen continually used during combat. The Flame Whip spell was his starting point, being so close to the priestly spell Flame Blade, he could easily see connections there. *I will have to come up with a different source for the power behind them obviously. But the Weave should do well enough for that once I have finished the rest of the cantrip... possibly. There is a reason beyond wizards preferring to combat at a distance that no wizard can use that spell, after all.*

He worked on that for an hour, and then turned his attention back to work that he was supposed to be doing, a faint smile of triumph appearing on his face as he did. He'd made quite a bit of progress on his own personal job, and would simply need to tweak his new spell via testing. *Now that I have seen to my own needs, I can spend some time on to the task Harry gave me.*

This was easier said than done. First, the notebook had not included any key to decipher anything else within it to match with the squiggles on the iron key were no help. Yes, some of the images there appeared on the paper, but in now set order. It looked as if regular words in this weird foreign language had been split up, jumbled, and then joined with various symbols. It was a puzzle, to be sure. One worthy of Edwin's talents. *Yet I would prefer to have some measure of a corner to start myself off with,* he mused.

Edwin sat there for some time, ordering a late lunch for himself, only to sneer a bit at the food when it finally arrived. As several of the others had commented on, Harry's food was beginning to spoil him. *One does not expect to be able to travel with a master chef, who can make even a meal made out over a open wire seem so palatable even to one such as I, but once one does get used to such, is hard to accept the normal fair of it in like this. Ah well, at least the wine is still cold and thus palatable.*

He pushed the haunch of meat away, and concentrated instead on the bread only to be interrupted by a voice before he could turn his mind back to the work at hand. "OOH that's a pretty cloak! I look at all those symbols on your sleeves, are you a wizard?"

The voice was high-pitched, almost childish yet decidedly feminine. And Edwin was in no way surprised to look up and find himself faced with a halfling. His eyes narrowed, and he growled out "And what business is it of you know whether or not I'm a wizard? If your own eyes cannot be believed, why should you I give you my word on the matter?"

The halfling paused, and very visibly took a moment to decipher what he had just said, before grinning a little. "Well, aren't you all fancy. See you are a wizard, but you think I'm going to bother you. So many words, and saying so little. That almost reminds me of being home."

Edwin stare turned affronted at that, and he scowled a little, raising a hand and preparing to test spell. Then the woman went on, almost as if she hadn't even noticed his threatening manner. "Then again, I think your use of language is way better than theirs, and while I'm still getting used to menfolk, human folk I mean, you're certainly more handsome than any of the known boys back home."

"While I may accept the compliment such as it was, I do not accept the interest," Edwin said, now somewhat bemused.

She shrugged her shoulders, then hopped into the booth but will on the other side, smiling cheerily. She wiggled her fingers, and then was holding two rings in her palm. "Eh, wasn't really showing interest that way, you know, just making conversation. I like pretty things sometimes but like these rings, glittering things can become boring after a bit."

Edwin was extremely surprised by the speed of the young halflings fingers, he had been watching for something, some trouble or other, and yet hadn't even seen her move. But she was now holding two rings. *Which means either she has access to her Item Box and can manipulate it almost as well as Harry and the rest of his party can, or she is truly that quick. Or she doesn't have anything else in it.*

Nonetheless, Edwin was quickly intrigued. While he did not have the Grater Observation skill like Harry, Edwin was a wizard and that allowed him to see there was magic in items even if he wasn't all that good at imbuing magic into items in the first place. Both of those rings were glowing magically to his senses. Small scale magic, nothing major, but even so it was an interesting sign of the young halfling's skill. Or perhaps, given the speed of her fingers, how good a pickpocket she might be.

Looking at the young halfling more closely, Edwin could see other pockets of magical potential, items glowing from various pockets on her person, rather than being equipped. *Which speaks much to her intelligence. Equipping something which uses magic you do not know or understand is the height of foolishness.* "I take it you wish to purchase my services in identifying magical items? Dare I ask was whether or not you came upon these items legally?"

"I don't think you'd care one way or another about the legal kind of thing, unless I am wrong about what a red wizard robe means," the halfling said cheerily, causing Edwin to bark a laugh despite himself. "Besides, I found them fair and square. It's not my fault that people think that locked doors, barred windows, and guards are enough to keep someone out when they're curious."

Edwin's bark of laughter turned into a short chortle at that, shaking his head slightly. "And exactly how will you pay? Curiosity might be your driving trait, young miss, but it is not mine."

The halfling opened her mouth, but then her eyes were drawn to the paper Edwin. Before Edwin could think of hiding what he was working on, she snatched up the paper, staring at it thoughtfully. "I've seen something like this before. It looks like a strange mix of an alchemists note, and thieves cant put on paper." Thieves cant was a private, entirely made up language that organized groups of thieves, like the Shadow Thieves in Amn, used to communicate between themselves. "They always speak like that, like 'Ten five Owl six/thirds and five fifths of the other to mean ten at night on the fifth day and whatever they are moving, followed by where it's going. Secret codes to mean different types of equipment and so forth."

Edwin scowled. "And do you think you could help decipher this?"

The young halflings shrugged her shoulders, pulled out a piece of paper that Edwin had left blank for his translations, and began to scribble. "I know some of the symbols they mean, let's see..."

The two of them bent to the work, with Edwin now able to decode the alchemical alchemists side of things within another hour or so and then helping the young halflings with the other bits. The two of them worked quite well together, with the young halfling's easy-going affable nature somehow

blending well with Edwin's own acerbic one. By the end of the time, he was almost sad to point out that all that had been simply on the halflings own volition, and nothing to do with paying him for for his services.

But then, the halfling just shrugged. "That's fine. It was fun. That's all that matters to me really, having fun and meeting interesting people and see interesting things and....

Edwin allowed the chatter of the young girl to wash over him, leaning back and staring at her thoughtfully, absentmindedly casting an identification spell on the ring she had left on the table in front of him, somehow, finding her presence quite... pleasant. *Perhaps the others have softened me somewhat to their plebian characters, but I quite enjoy this one.*

"Tell me," he said, feeling somewhat compelled almost to ask. "Do you have someplace to stay in town? If not, I am certain my party can put you up for the evening. Consider it an actual payment for the work you just did.

The young halflings, whose name was Alora, smiled cheerily at that, asking of all of them were as interesting as Edwin, who snorted in laughter. "I believe you will not find any of us without character."

"I like character," Alice said cheerily, hopping to her feet. Moments later, they were out of the tavern, and she pulled three bottles of wine from her item space. "I also like wine, and these were just laying around. What is that innkeeper thinking? Honestly. We're doing him a favor pointing out his mistakes, really."

Edwin snorted, and was still chuckling at that by the time the two reached Landrin's home.

OOOOOOO

While Edwin was just getting started on the work assigned to him for the day, Harry and the others were heading back to town. Harry really wanted to explore the area around the lake the people of Beregost used as a fishery more, but he also wanted to do that because he wanted to look into the Leadership skill more, and figure what more information beyond his progress he could see now, realizing that something had to have changed in his recent level up to allow even that.

But with an outsider along, that wasn't going to happen. So instead, they trooped back to town, wary of enemies along the way. But seeing nothing, although they did pass by the same point where Minsc had found the hobgoblin blood on the way out.

"Ah young Harry, I have been wanting to ask, but what God do you feel called to serve? I know you are a paladin in training, but we have yet to talk about your specific path going forward," Bjornin questioned, as the first of the outer farms came into view.

"At present, I believe I feel more strongly called towards Torm or Tyr," Harry said cautiously. Bjornin was the first paladin of any kind he'd met so far. He'd met and dealt with several priests, but not a full paladin. He wasn't certain how paladins who followed one specific God would take it that Harry had yet to figure out which one was worthy of his service, which he rather thought was somewhat a reverse of the normal way of doing things. Most paladins strove to be worthy of their God rather than deciding which one more closely aligned with their own beliefs. "I was raised in Candlekeep, and they

had no temple or priest to any of the gods barring Oghma. So I have simply comported myself as best I can, learning about the Gods of Light as I go.”

“Ah, that makes some sense. You are not alone in following a more central path I suppose you could say. Many who are called to the role of paladin come from areas like Candlekeep, where one god or another is worshipped almost to the exclusion of others. Do not worry about it, I am certain that some piece of information or action will steer you down the correct path. Although, I obviously serve Torm.”

Bjornin fell silent, and Harry watched the other man, who actually wasn't all that much older than Harry, reached up and scratched his chin where it was visible under his helmet. Recovered from the half-ogres along with the rest of the paladin's equipment, Bjornin had been quick to shift to it after the battle. “It began as, well I hate to say this, as but as a legacy sort of thing. My family had served Helm for several generations before the Time of Troubles. But during the Time of Troubles, my father felt called to give his vows to Torm instead.”

Harry nodded, having already learned that the religion of Helm had shrunk tremendously during the trip Time of Troubles, given that God's actions at the time. The fact he struck down Mystra which in turn caused so much upheaval in the physical plane and in the Weave was but one part. The fact he did not pursue the evil gods who had caused Ao to act, instead of simply standing guard against all gods attempting to reenter the planar realms was another reason why Torm, a once-mortal hero, had gained such a following. His avatar was recorded to have killed an avatar of Bane's during the Time of Troubles, keeping a Table of Fate safe from the god of oppression, terror and hate. That story wasn't so clear cut, but the fierce loyalty and desire to stand against evil that Torm represented at a time that Helm's actions seemed to be that of a mere guard dog had an impact.

“There is a somewhat... personal story as to what action finally tipped the balance, but I will not share it. I will instead say that I questioned that decision until it came time for me to stand vigil on my weapons at the altar of Torm, as it had split our family quite badly. Yet at that time, I felt the touch of my God, like a massive hand on my shoulder, and a voice issuing my first Paladin Quest into my mind. I knew then I had made the correct decision to follow my father despite my misgivings into the faith of Torm. I hope when it's time for you to set your own vigil, you will feel the same. It is an uplifting experience to have all of your doubts washed away like that, to have your purpose laid out clearly for you,” Bjornin said, his face gleaming with fervor.

He then had the good grace to cough then, looking away in embarrassment. “Even if your personal path forward is never as clear as you might think. And just because you know your purpose, does not mean that you will always be able to achieve it. Or that you cannot stumble along the way, as I did.”

“T, the gods give us free will, and w, w, with it, the ability to s, s, screw up,” Khalid joked from nearby.

Their acquaintance chuckled at that, nodding, before going on to explain that there are very few actual paladins in this portion of the Sword Coast currently. “It is not historically an area that requires many of us who fight for the Light. There are always monsters here of course, and the constant battle to keep the roads clear. But such things call more for rangers and warriors. You might meet more in

Balder's Gate itself, I passed through the city quickly, and could not tell you much of it. But outside of the city-state's gates, I only know of two others. And one I know was heading to Daggerford like, well, like someone had lit his boots on fire. He was a Blade of Tyr."

"I've not heard of them," Harry said, looking between Bjornin and Khalid.

Khalid nodded. "It is an u, u, unofficial title given by other paladins to t, t, those among their brethren who follow Tyr b, b, but who are not connected overmuch to the v, v, various paladin orders. Rather, they are w, w, wanderers, with noses for t, t, trouble."

Harry briefly thought that probably would describe him, but simply nodded, looking over at Bjornin, who explained that he had met another young man, even younger than Bjornin, whose name was Ajantis who had pledged to serve Helm. Once more, Bjornin looked a little embarrassed, saying that, "Unlike myself, who come from a family of paladins, this young man was apparently a member of nobility who felt Helm's calling when he decided to act against his own family after discovering that they were... dealing in slaves, paying the local constables to look the other way. He gathered evidence and went to a renowned paladin who was in the city, and was taken on as a squire paladin of the Order of the Radiant Heart afterward."

"Impressive," Harry answered, with Khalid, Minsc and even Dynaheir making noises of approval. "And where is Alexander now?"

"He remained near Balder's Gate. When I left him, Ajantis was trying to gather a group to helping a hamlet of farmers plagued a large family of Ankheg." Bjornin answered.

Everyone there winced, and Bjornin nodded dryly. "Yes, he'll probably be there for a while. His equipment was pretty much as good as my own at the time, but he was having trouble convincing other adventurers to fight alongside him against the threat for very little pay."

Given how dangerous ankheg could be, Harry easily understood why. If you didn't have something that could block their acid, you would be in a lot of trouble. It was only because of how many spell casters they had in their party, Harry, and Imoen's own special abilities that allowed them to overcome the group of Ankheg who had attacked the party while Harry Jaheira and Viconia were making their way towards them. *That, and Jaheira, Viconia and I surprised them by attacking them from behind. Even then it was damned close.*

"What is the relationship between Tyr and Torm. They are allies, correct? And I know that Torm and Helm get along, but as your own story indicates, their priesthoods sometimes clash," Dynaheir wondered.

"We are taught as paladins of the Order of the Radiant Heart that Tyr is the leader of the Triad of Light. He is a remote God for the most part, but he has spoken to a few paladins over the ages. Most think of him as a war captain, who always has their back, whose goals are often on the strategic level rather than the local. Sometimes he speaks to whole groups of the Order, giving them warning of some great evil or injustice, but such things are rare indeed. I have also heard tell that Tyr has a sense of humor, but I cannot say whether or not that is rumor or not. Tyr believes in justice over everything. Torm is much the same, but instead of being personable with with those he contacts in the first place, he is always gruff, a no nonsense sort, but one who will always stand with you."

“Like a sergeant in an army, maybe? Someone who pushes you to be your best, and who is most unequivocally in charge, but is also one of the men,” Harry suggested.

“Exactly. I quite like that description actually. Tyr in contrast is somewhat like a lieutenant in an army, he’s not quite one of you, and you can never get that impression, but you know he will also fight alongside you. And given your respective positions, he has the leeway to act a little more personable than the sergeant. Tyr also demands far more in terms of independence of thought among those he directly takes into his service. Those Tyr hutches seek out evil, especially devils, demons and acts of injustice. Whereas Torm prefers to lead, sending out groups to combat larger troubles. He is more about service and protection, protecting the weak against their fellow man in particular, and seeking out the worshippers of Cyric and Bane.”

Bjornin shrugged his shoulders at Harry’s quizzical expression. “There is a lot of overlap there admittedly, which when you consider going back to your previous question about the relationships, make sense. Torm is Tyr’s man, his sworn bannerman among the gods, and the relationship is extremely close due to that.”

The young paladin thought about it for a moment, then came up with a way to explain the differences between the two groups. “Consider how a paladin of one god or another would respond to a specific issue. If word reached a paladin of Torm that there was a lord who was abusing his power, that paladin would defend his people from that lord’s depredations, perhaps to the point of either leading them in an armed revolt working alongside the blessings of Ilmater, defending them until some other noble of higher station became aware of the problem and dealt with the aggressor honorably. Whereas a paladin of Tyr would first determine the guilt of the individual, and then deal with the Lord directly, calling on Tyr’s justice rather than allowing the local laws of the kingdom they were in to run their course. And he would be within his right to do so in most civilized nations.”

“Sound as if a paladin of Tyr wouldn’t be altogether popular with the nobility of any nation,” Harry opined.

“Often times that is the case, although followers of Tyr also comprise judges, magistrates and watchmen. But in both cases, the paladins involved would follow the principle of forbearance. That the true and just must consider their actions first, so as to ensure their intent would uphold the chivalric ideals that both gods hold sacred. No personal feeling can be allowed to get in the way of a ruling like that.”

Harry nodded, thinking about the book he had been given all the way back at the Friendly Arm Inn, and was more certain than ever he would need to choose between these two specific gods. Other gods called out to him, but none of them actually had paladins of their own. He also knew that that book was connected to how he would go about doing so given the visions he had gotten as he read through it that just made a lot of sense to him.

Whether or not that was the case for most paladins, or anywhere close to our regular paladins came to pledge themselves to their gods, Harry didn’t know. But it was the one that had been placed before him.

Yet he wasn’t going to do that yet. He desperately wanted to work on his Leadership skills now that he could see actual progress for it, and he hadn’t actually looked at his character sheet very closely

after his last level up, still reeling from Branwen's death and how close they had all come to joining her. But now, having seen actual Leadership points given for the recent ambush he'd planned and led, Harry there was more there that he hadn't yet seen, and he wanted to dive into it.

And I also get the impression that a paladin quest is a time sensitive kind of thing. I definitely don't want to start on that while we're still stuck here in Beregost, he mused. Conflicting missions like that would be very bad, and might force me to choose one or the other.

The group talked about other things until they reached the inn that Bjornin was staying in, whereupon they shook hands, and parted ways. Harry let his group over to the office of officer Valerie, checking in with the officer of the town watch on duty there. He requested another job that would take them out of the town for the rest of the day. "Something the four of us can see to while the rest of our party are helping around town."

The officer looked a little surly at the adventurers, something Harry's Greater Observation informed him of: that the man had a certain amount of hatred and envy towards adventurers in general, and Harry's party in particular thanks to how Vai saw Harry.

Although she has kept Viconia's presence in your party a secret and thus your Drow Lover appellation has not spread, her general attitude towards you is obvious, as is that of Kelddath. Rumors abound as to why, but none are connected to the rumors of a Drow passing through the town.

Despite that, the guard complied, pulling out a sheet of wanted posters. Two of them were extremely sparse, simply having a list of descriptions rather than an actual drawing. The third though did have a drawing, showing a middle-aged man, complete with hood, extremely long pointed nose, an eye patch, and a stubby kind of beard which grew up and around a series of scars carved into the man's lower face.

"Oh dear, whatever happened to that poor man?" Dynaheir murmured, her face showing both confusion and horror. "And what foolish notion entered his head to believe that his expression could be improved by trying to grow a beard through all that?"

"Better to wear your scars of battle proudly than try to hide them away. That is most foolish, even if it had succeeded at all," Minsc agreed, shaking his head sadly.

The jokes seemed to mellow the watch officer's attitude, and he laughed along with Harry, before explaining "That's Mage Jemby. He is part of a group of three, although apparently not the leader of them, of thieves who have recently been trying to prey on people around here. Despite their looks, they're actually a threat, and have killed one guard, three farmers, and even accosted a local merchant a few days ago. They make their hideout somewhere out in the woods to the west of here, and are thus out of our purview. Bring them in, dead or alive, and proof of their deaths if dead."

Harry nodded, watching as a simple quest popped up, subtly clicking on it with his eye movements.

Bounty quest. Hunt down three local thieves and murderers. A simple, straightforward quest to do onto them as they have done onto so many weaker peasants. T

three scumbags have outworn their welcome near Beregost, and you have been tasked to deal with them. This is rather like setting a bear on a trio of hyenas who have been lobotomized, but it is still an act that needs doing, considering that these three hyenas in question have been killing locals.

Kill all three members of the Tenygan gang to receive your rule rewards.

Rewards: 200 experience for completing the quest. You will also receive experience for each individual's death much like the bounty hunters and murderers that have come after you previously or the monsters you slay.

Note: As This mission falls under your agreement with Vai, there is no monetary gain here barring what you find on the thieves. Instead, you will gain an improved relationship reputation with the guards and civilians of Beregost. This will aid in Bartering with the local merchants and will help combat any rumors attempting to link you to the drow sighting regardless of Vai and Kelddath keeping the facts a secret.

Harry nodded firmly, accepted the three bounty posters, then asked some questions about where they were, and how the guards knew they were to the west rather than anywhere else. "And I'm also wondering if we should do this job, or follow up on the wyvern hunting job given to us by Kelddath first. Which is more important, do you think?"

Having directed this question at the officer, Harry watched as he seemed to blink, throwing his brows and leaned back in his chair thoughtfully, some of his annoyance with Harry and his companions fading as they seemed willing to listen to him. "Well, considering that wyvern thing is relatively new, and these three have been around for a while, you would think that the wyvern would be more important. But from what we were told by the head priest, it only killed two pilgrims." He paused then, looking around to make certain he wasn't overheard, and went on a lower voice. "And frankly, no offense meant to any of the gods and especially not Lathander, but the murder of locals and merchants matter more to the people of Beregost than the death of strangers."

That was a cynical way of putting it, but Harry understood the man's point and nodded gravely, looking over at his companions for their opinions.

"It is but passing mid afternoon. With Khalid and Minsc's tracking skills, mayhap we could do both in a day, so we need not prioritize," Dynaheir said crisply. "Bandits by their very nature are lazy. I doubt they will be more than an hour outside of the patrol routes that the guards of this good town follow."

"I wouldn't know, I've killed a lot of bandits so far since leaving Candlekeep, but I've never made a study of them," Harry drawled shaking his head. At one point, speaking so callously of killing his fellow man would have horrified Harry. Oh but by this point, he was hardened to that reality in this world. That, and perhaps my advanced adventure mind is helping.

"There is also the mystery of the wounded hobgoblin whose blood I discovered friend Harry. That would lead us to the West as well."

Khalid simply shrugged his shoulders. "P, p, perhaps it is my desire to explore the woodlands east and n, n, north of here, but I would perhaps h, h, have said we should go after the wyvern's first. But I t, t, think for that mission we would also need my w, w, wife along. No offense to you, f, f, friend Minsc, but

wyvern's fly. And unless y, y, you can tell me you can track a bird on t, t, the wing a Druid's powers with tree and f, f, forest would probably allow us to discover t, t, their lair far more quickly."

"Minsc fully agrees! Flying monsters are indeed quite tricky for Minsc to track, and they also make Boo quite scared, flying around above our heads as they do. He always thinks they are going to sweep down on us, despite Minsc's best efforts to explain that Minsc is far too large and powerful to be so plucked," Minsc said, reaching up to his collarbone, where the head of his little pet head appeared startling the officer at the desk who was watching this conversation with the air of someone who didn't care what the adventurers did really, just that they get out of his hair.

"All right, let's hunt some bandits then." With that, Harry nodded his head to the officer on the watch, and lead his group of four currently back outside. He remained quiet for a few moments after they left, soon leaving the town proper and heading out into the farmlands around it. There, as before earlier in the day they didn't see very many people, and Harry felt it safe to start examining his character sheet again, whispering to the others what he was doing.

Pulling up his character sheet, Harry looked at his sheet closely.

Name: Harry
Gender: Male
Race: Human
Class: Paladin level 7

Strength: (20)

Willpower: (22)

Dexterity: (17)

Constitution: (19)

Durability: (12)

Wisdom: (16)

Charisma: (17)

Intelligence: (20)

Luck: (10) +/- 4

Bloodline Skills:

Potter Luck, Gamer's mind, Parselmouth, *****, *****

Learned Skills:

Leadership, Level 2

Tactics, Level 3

Mapmaker

Greater Observation

I've Got the Willpower

Lifestyle Skills:

Master Chef

Sexual Awareness

Perception

Woodcraft (untrained)

Class Skills:

Lay on Hands

Cleave

Backstab

Background notes:

Having now stepped out into the wider world beyond the tutorial, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived of one world, has discovered he might be the equivalent or something worse in this one. His father figure taken from him through violence, Harry and his cousin Imoen (the pink-haired troublemaker formerly known as Tonks) must search for answers as to why he seems to have been marked out as Fate's Bitch. Is it just luck, or is something deeper, something...sinister at play? Regardless, Harry will have to face it as it comes.

Harry had put two points in charisma and another point in wisdom, having hoped that the added charisma would help him with Vai. But there was a single difference that Harry hadn't seen when he looked at his level up page. The Leadership Skill now seemed to glow a slightly different color than the other skills and perks on his character sheet. When his eyes hovered over it, that yellow color came into the forefront even more, and he blinked, then hesitantly clicked on it with his eyes as he would when accepting a quest or for when shifting from one portion of his character sheet to the next page.

This opened up an entirely new page, and Harry groaned to himself not having noticed it before. *I need to get better at using this kind of thing. Still grieving for Brandy is no excuse for having missed that after we discussed what Leadership upgrade I should take.*

With a grumble under his breath, Harry concentrated on the screen in front of him. Leadership and Tactics were both on the screen now, like headers at the top of two pages on an open book with Leadership on one page and Tactics on the next. They were connected across by lines, which made it look as if some things could impact or perhaps merge together from one side to another. That's fascinating, can one skill maybe enhance another?

Unfortunately, a lot of those lines and the little blurbs above them were grayed out, covered over almost so that Harry could see they were there, but could not make out the words underneath. Well, most of them were, there were a few lines that looked as if they were glowing, although this time when Harry tried to click on them, nothing came up. Harry decided that meant like the still hidden information, there was a connection there. But he wasn't a high enough Leadership or Tactics level to understand it.

The Tactics page looked somewhat straightforward, and Harry could understand most of what he could see, or at least guess. It began with the Tactics name at the top, along with information on Harry's current level. Harry was pleased to note that his experience in Tactics was also shown, Level 3, with a simple 3,125/4,000 showing there.

Below that box, other boxes sat, each of them filled with descriptions. All of the the formations and tactics Harry had used so far were there, and the rest of the page showed spaces for a lot more formations. But formations weren't all that were shown, there looked to be another type of box there. Rather than the simple rectangular box, there were several star-shaped blurs.

Those have got to be important, right? If the formations have to be activated by having my companions and I form into them, then maybe those stars are passives that are always on, or activated skills that can help in battle regardless of formation? Several of the stars and more than a few of the grayed out formations were connected to the Leadership tree by the lines Harry had noted before.

But the Leadership page was not a simple list or multiple boxes like the Tactics page. Instead, it was a tree, starting from Harry's leadership level, and, like with Tactics, his experience was shown there, 2622/6,000. But then the page split up into three different branches. War, which was directly next to Tactics, and had the most lines connecting the two, from what Harry could see. Logistics was in the middle with Societal on the far left.

That last one surprised Harry the most, as he instantly understood that could have some very strange interpretations. Did it mean the 'society' of his party, like how they got along with one another, interacted and so forth? If so, Harry had to wonder how being so open to those of opposite alignments like Victoria and Edwin would have on his skills there. But unlike in war, there was nothing listed here. The few lines crossing the page (which Harry considered very disorganized, something Hermione would have been apoplectic about, but neither of them had been asked for their opinions) seemed to lead nowhere. Just a blank section. *So... do I need to conclude I don't even have enough experience to even see the shape of what could be there, but I do when it comes to Tactics? So weird.*

But what if Society meant just that, the local society as a whole? Or did it just mean Harry's impact on society?

After mature reflection, Harry decided he was fine with not knowing what the heck was going on there. He wasn't ambitious by any means, and had no desire to change society as a whole, despite his recent clashes on the whole Viconia topic with Vai and Kelddath and even the gods. And Harry certainly had no desire to become some kind of ruler. That sounded far too much like more responsibility and work that he wanted to do. *I can barely handle a single adventuring company!*

Logistics was easy to understand, and underneath it had the most tabs and information that Harry could access already. His Mapmaker, his Barter skill, and his Complex Item Box were all there, although to Harry's surprise, there was a line connecting Complex Item Space to both something in War, and another Logistical skill that he already possessed, Mapmaker. That was a little odd, and Harry thought about it for several moments, but couldn't quite see a connection there.

Nonetheless, Harry read over several of the formations and Tactics again, beginning to think of how they would impact war, a tab of Leadership that, astonishingly, Harry hadn't discovered any direct skills from just yet. I imagine that shared willpower and definitely battle prowess would go under there, still not convinced that they would be good choices at my low level just yet. If they can upgrade as I also level up great, but... But do I have to take them, and then watch as they accrue experience as well? Would they gain the same experience as my Leadership skill does, or would they take a percentage of that?

"This advanced adventurer system really needs a guide of some kind," he grumbled aloud.

"D, d, does that mean you would want everything to be h, h, handed to you on a silver platter, Harry? I r, r, rather think it's working brilliantly. You n, n, need to work at it, to experiment and c, c, continue to level up to gain m, m more understanding of it, just l, l, like you would need to explore the world itself t, t, to understand the world beyond Candlekeep," Khalid answered, his tone philosophical.

That did not mean it was very helpful, and the deadpan gaze Harry gave him had the older elf snorting a look little, shaking his head. "A, a, as my wife is not around to t, t, tell you that, I thought I would f, f, fill in."

"You did so ably. Don't do it again," Harry drawled back, and the two men laughed, with Dynaheir snickering behind them.

Soon, the group of four were near the outer farm where the guard had said the merchant had been attacked. There, Minsc quickly picked up the trail of the three thieves, leading them off through the nearby woods, using his hide in shadows skill as he took point.

As he watched the shifting away from the party as he and Dynaheir and Khalid slowly followed, Harry's mind went back to the minor mysteries he had found on the Leadership and Tactics pages of his character sheet. "What is the connection between Complex Item Box and Mapmaker? I don't understand that at all..."

Dynaheir blinked, while Khalid simply frowned, shrugged his shoulders, and turned his attention back to the woods they are currently traveling through. He had seen something on a tree a few moments ago that had caused him to stiffen up, but hadn't seen it repeated, yet. But he hadn't lasted as long as he

had as a Harper by not noticing small things like that. “What? Could you explain that Harry? Your Advanced Adventuring System is fascinating, but I must admit, that is one connection I cannot wrap my own mind around.”

Harry explained how his Leadership skill had changed, or rather how his ability to interact with it had, anyway. The skill trees were fascinating to both of his listeners, and Khalid made Harry promise to tell Jaheira and Edwin about them that night when they returned to Beregost. He was certain his wife would want to know, and despite still having issues with Edwin’s general attitude, no one could doubt the red wizard’s mind.

But neither of them could come up with an explanation as to why Complex Item Box would be connected to his maps, except for Khalid’s belief that perhaps if Harry left something behind that he could pick up into his Item box that location would still be shown on the map. But that seemed very small scale in comparison, and how would that work anyway? Harry didn’t know.

What was most interesting to all of them was that the Skills Harry had seen previously but hadn’t chosen were still shown. Harry couldn’t click on them, and they were grayed out, but Harry could see what also looked like experience bars underneath them. This meant that perhaps as he performed deeds that gave him Leadership points, he could also upgrade those connected Skills.

“I don’t think so,” Dynaheir disagreed, shaking her head. “I think that much like the physical training that Khalid has you doing to truly master swordplay, those skills can also be worked on, much like a thieves skills in pickpocketing and so forth. Or like your own Life Skills.” Dynaheir hummed thoughtfully. “Fascinating. Being able to see your progress is a magnificent concept.”

Harry nodded, then held a hand up as Dynaheir made to continue, pointing forward where he had just seen Minsc’s icon on his map stopping. But instead of returning right away, Minsc was shifting around at an angle. He reported this to the others, then looked over at Khalid. “Your call, stay where we are, or move at an angle to meet up with Minsc.”

Khalid instantly said that they should try to move to meet up with Minsc, or to find a defensible position. “I, I, if Minsc is coming back in a r, r, roundabout fashion, then there m, m, might have been a, a, an ambush point he had bypassed initially, or s, s, simply traps ahead.”

When Minsc showed up, that proved to be the case. “This vile trio, they have some skill in woodcraft. Several times as I followed the trail I came to dead ends, or little traps they had laid behind them as they retreated back to their evil lair.”

“I don’t think three low level thieves deserve to have something that is as amazing sounding as an evil lair, Minsc,” Harry snickered, shaking his head. “Unless they’re a part of a larger band?”

“No they are not, although I saw signs of others moving through these woods. One of whom was not as perceptive as Minsc and Boo, and who tripped a trap. The gnoll in question left his blood there, but continued on with his war band.”

Harry grimaced, remembering the fight through the gnoll fortress, and how it had nearly been too much for them. “How many gnolls did you see signs for?”

“Many, as many as ten or more moving in a band,” Minsc answered instantly shaking his head. “The scent of groll was strong, and there are many of them, trooping along as organized as such creatures ever are. They did not find our thieves or vice versa, but Minsc believes that is because the gnolls were not looking, and the thieves were sneakily hiding, as such cowards would. Further, they were returning along a recently made path.”

“Coming back then, instead of going out. Returning to a base of some kind, a camp? And the guards at Beregost didn’t know anything about gnolls moving around like this so close to the town. Does that sound as bad to anyone else as it does to me?” No one else answered, but Harry could see by the grim expressions on Khalid and Dynaheir faces that they agreed. A force that large of monsters this close to a civilized town was bad news.

While they had certainly leveled up since the first time they’d run into gnolls, not knowing how many gnolls there were greatly hampered the risk Harry was willing to take out here. *We might be able to take on a group of ten, if we are able to ambush them like we did those half ogres. But I’m not willing to take the chance that there could be still more out there somewhere.*

“Minsc can also tell you that we are close to where he and Dynaheir were ambushed by gnolls when we were traveling down the sword coast,” Minsc reported further shaking his head. “These gnolls might be in some way connected to the fortress of badness that we already destroyed. A force sent out by the fortress before we attacked it, perhaps.”

Harry scowled nodding at that. “Given that place was a dungeon, that also makes sense. Let’s see if we can find the thieves, then head back to town. We’ll come back out this way with our full group again tomorrow to search for the gnolls and figure out what they’re up to.”

Everyone else nodded, and with Minsc now leading from the front of the band, they made their way around the area the thieves had traveled along to ambush the merchant, coming on their camp from a different angle.

The camp was small, made for only three people, and it wasn’t well-defended, but it was tricky to approach. Three trees have been cut down, creating a triangular breaker around the small camp. It wasn’t a wall, the trees are not nearly large enough for that, but instead it created a makeshift berm. That would force any attacker to clamber up it, while also giving the defenders a bit of protection to their lower bodies from enemy fire.

And Minsc was certain there were traps around the area to boot. The movements of loam and fallen leaf was not natural in this area. Even Khalid was certain of that. Indeed, he seemed somewhat scornful of the thief’s attempts to hide their work.

“None of us have any ability to disable traps though, so the only way to get past those traps we assume are there is to spring them,” Harry mused. Indeed, Minsc would probably not have been able to see any of the traps, if not for the fact that those traps were in a forest, and he’d seen evidence in terms of blood from the gnolls that there was a trap in the area, warning him there could be more and putting the massive ranger on guard against more. “Dynaheir, do you still have another smog spell?”

“Yes. I can cast it into the center of their camp for certain,” Dynaheir agreed. “But we will have to spread out in order to catch them considering that they might run in any direction.”

“True.” Harry thought about it for a moment.

All of them were laying out behind bushes to stare through the forests at the camp, where they could see the three thieves moving about. One of them seemed to be working on polishing his weapons, two daggers and a longsword laid out on top of the berm, where he was working all on them with a wet stone. A composite bow lay nearby, the arrows unseen below the top of the berm. He was a hobgoblin, and around one shoulder was what looked like a red-stained wrap.

Name: Zekar

Class: Level 5 Warrior

A half orc, Zekar is the muscle of the group. He doesn't seem to be very smart, but there are marks on his hands and arms, spots of green and moss, that indicate he might have been the one to do the work setting up the camp.

The other two were sitting down, their heads barely visible above the log berm. But they were still within range of Harry's Greater Observations skills.

Name: Jemby

Class: Level 5 Mage

While low-level for her apparent age, Jemby might be trickier than you expect if not taken seriously. A certain gleam in her eyes also tells you she can be a cruel one if need be. Her robes also look like a Robes of Magic Resistance you have seen on a few mages so far.

Heh looks like she wanted posters mixed up the other guy with the mage's name. I wouldn't call her good looking by any means from what I can see here, but she doesn't match the scarred, bearded etching we were shown, Harry mused. Now that other fella on the other hand. He looks like someone took an ugly stick to his face.

Name: Tenygan

Class: Level 6 Warrior

Although having faced several battles in his time, Tenygan's continued life has more to do with his tenacity and speedy feet than actual strength. Be warned though, he is wearing somewhat decent armor, and could prove quite durable in a battle.

A small fire was also there. Khalid reported he could hear the crackle of fire, but there was no smoke, another sign that these three thieves had some excellent woodcraft skills. The half-elf also reported that the two people sitting down were arguing about a series of books they had taken off of the merchant. “O, o, one of them wants to wait and s, s, sell it as per their normal loot to their n, n, normal fence, who they apparently meet up with d, d, down in Nashkel. The other wants to sell t, t, them in Beregost, saying she knows a specific p, p, person who would pay for at least t, t, two of those books in good g, g, gold. Implying that they would get m, m, more that way, I suppose.”

Harry nodded, still considering the problem of how to ensnare the thieves so that they didn't get away. He didn't really want to split up the party again as they had when ambushing the half ogres. There, the half ogres had been trapped in the smog with one direction blocked by the huge stone they had set

their camp alongside. But they had also not been inclined to run away due to their low intelligence. Thieves would certainly run away, and there was no guarantee that Dynaheir's smog would knock all three of them out.

"Minsc, can you imitate animal noises? Roars or howls, I mean?"

"Freind Harry is jesting! Any Ranger worth his salt can imitate at least a few animals. You should see me imitate the noise of a woodchuck. Minsc did it so well, that a lady woodchuck came looking for Minsc at one point. That was a most awkward meeting, Minsc has to admit," Minsc said, causing Harry and Khalid to snort.

"Well, here's what we're going to do. Minsc, make your way around the camp to the other side. Start making noises of some large dangerous predator that is from around here. Bear, wolf, I don't care which. Khalid, can you do the same?"

"W, w, wolves," Khalid answered instantly. "You mean to scare t, t, them into watching one area of the Woodland's m, m, more than the others? If we imitate w, w, wolves from various areas around the c, c, camp, they will move in the opposite direction."

"Or if they don't run, they'll be looking that way, and I can close without needing to dodge arrows. A Bombarda can clear away the traps if I have to. And if we can split their attention, they won't be able to coordinate any kind of defense." Harry explained, then looked over at Dynaheir. "When the attack begins, you'll be free to use direct attack spells. I don't want you to use your Smog spells. Whatever else, thieves would still try to run if they're faced with that kind of thing and our attacking them. And I will only start attacking with your spells once I'm inside the camp."

Dynaheir agreed, understanding that Harry was far more concerned about the thieves getting away than their ability to actually fight them.

When it came time to launch the ambush, it worked quite well. One of the thieves, the hobgoblin Zekar, had stayed up on watch, sitting on the berm and looking towards the noise of where Minsc had begun with a wolf howl. Minsc was joined by Khalid a second later elsewhere in the forest, and between them, they began to set up a cacophony, causing the guard on duty to rouse his fellows. Man woman and hobgoblin stared worriedly towards where the noises are coming from, and Harry moved around the camp to the other side, coming in on it from there, able to see at almost as well in the dark as in the day thanks to the ring of infra-vision, one of many they'd been able to acquire through their adventures in Nashkel and the mines.

As he came towards the small clearing though, he paused, then held up his hand, willing his magic out and into a spell that dug up the ground in front of him, setting off the traps therein, taking the hit to his health grimly. "Bombarda!"

At the noise of the spell, all three of the thieves instantly turned, but Harry was already charging forward, his sword and shield out. The two fighters made it to the berm before he could, and he was forced to block a blow from above him from Tenygan who had jumped on top of the berm to hit down at him.

His attempt to cut the legs out from under the man was blocked by Zekar as Jemby began a spell. That spell ended however when Magic Missiles zoomed out of the darkness behind Harry to impact the

woman, interrupting her spell work and knocking her to the ground with a groan of pain, Jemby having been stepping back as she had been casting. That was something of a rookie mistake according to Harry's talks with Edwin and Dynaheir. Jemby wasn't dead, but she couldn't impact the fight for a moment

The hobgoblin tried cut down at Harry with a longsword, but Harry dodged backwards, bringing up his shield to block the next strike.

None of the thieves had noticed that the wolf cries had cut off. And seconds later, after Harry exchanged a few more blows with the two fighters holding the berm against him, Minsc and Khalid burst out of the woods on the other side, where they instantly began to go to their knees, pulling out bows and arrows from their inventory space rather than charging forward and daring the traps around the camp.

Two arrows struck the back of the hobgoblin, causing him to stumble despite his armor, and that allowed Harry to turn on the human, disarming him by aiming at the man's wrist, as he wasn't quite fast enough to pull back from a blow of his own.

The man's shield came up in a automatic move from the Sword and Shield skill, but that only deflected Harry's sword outward into the man's hand rather than his wrist. Tenygan didn't have gauntlets on, and lost his thumb on that hand, causing his weapon to fall out of his now useless hand as Tenygan screamed, backing away.

The warrior turned bandit was not fast enough. Harry's blade came back up and around, although again, the man's shield rose to block. The blow knocked him off of the berm, allowing Harry to twist around a blow that was coming in his way from the hobgoblin. The mage tried again to loose another spell, but this time, an arrow took her in the shoulder. Another arrow impacted the back of the hobgoblin, followed by a series of Magic Missiles from Dynaheir, which finished him off.

Zekar collapsed, his shoulder and head both exploding under the impact of the Magic Missiles, and then Harry was leaping up over the berm, bringing his sword down to finish off Jemby.

"You. You bastards, I'll, I'm gonna kill ya!" The last, Tenygan tried to fling his shield at Harry, and then turn and run away despite his words. But arrows once more found him, slamming into his side and the side of his neck. While the blue arrow to the side pinged off his half plate armor there, the arrow to the neck was lethal, killing him instantly.

Harry checked the body of the mage, then called an all clear, and was soon joined by Khalid, Minsc and Dynaheir, the other two having looped around the camp again to come in the same way that Harry had. As they did, a few messages showed up in Harry's line of sight.

[You earned 30 Leadership points for a well-planned ambush.](#)

[While the assault was well done, your enemies, despite having created a good position, were not exactly tough opponents, even weaker than their low levels would indicate. To a Bhaalson like yourself, they were barely worth the effort, and though you will gain experience for the dead, the lack of real oponents harms how much Leadership experience you earn through this act.](#)

[You have earned 350 for killing Jemby.](#)

[You have earned 650 experience for Killing Tenygan.](#)

[You have earned two-hundred and twenty experience for killing Zekar.](#)

[Return to the guard office with evidence of their deaths to receive your experience reward.](#)

Harry was amused that the Advanced Adventuring System explained that these three hadn't been really tough enough to give him a good fight, so he was only getting points for having thought out a way how around the camp and everything else rather than the fight itself. That made sense to him, considering how easy it had been once they'd actually engaged. *It would be another thing entirely if we'd had to face those traps that they'd laid out, but as it is, that's understandable.*

"Job well done troops." Harry instantly began to move around to the dead bodies, looting them of a hundred and twenty-nine gold, a minor potion of healing, three magic scrolls, all of them Remove Fear, and seven arrows of biting, a special kind of arrow Harry had seen before whose tip was designed to penetrate and be hard to remove. There are also the various weapons, armor and a Robe of Fire Resistance and each of them also had a scalp, complete with identifier to mark it out as the... original owner's.

That would've made for grizzly work without Harry's Advanced Adventuring System, something which Dynaheir pointed out once more, with a smile of deep thankfulness. They were quickly done and heading back to the town, with Minsc once more in the lead.

It being almost nighttime by this point their speed was greatly decreased, but Minsc led them well enough, although Khalid did report that he saw several more signs of gnolls being about in the area. "I, I am afraid that the fishermen of b, b, Beregost will have to wait a little longer before t, t, they can safely take up their pastime again."

Harry was tempted to lead them in the direction of the lake at that point, his thoughts returning to a point he had reflected on prior to the half-ogre battle on whether or not fishing could help any of them up their wisdom stats, but decided against it. It was too late for that, and if there are so many gnolls about, being out here with just four members of his party was a recipe for disaster.

Unfortunately, disaster decided to come to them.

"I'm hearing noises," Khalid said, holding up his hand and holding Harry and Dynaheir in place. "Noises of battle specifically. Gnolls shouting, and the clash of steel. It is faint, but it is there, coming from behind and to the south of us."

Harry checked his map, but didn't see any enemies on it, and said so. "Still, Elvish hearing probably lets you figure out things farther than my map does. What direction was that?"

Khalid indicated southwest now ironically pointing towards the Fisherman's Lake. Harry frowned at that, but then shrugged and said they had to check it out if there was enough noise for Khalid to hear from so far away. The four of them made their way in that direction.

And soon, Harry began to report red dots appearing on his screen. "Along with one blue dot. A single blue dot fighting at least fifteen red, maybe more, I'm seeing all this at the outer edge of my map range even now."

What was going on became clearer as they moved forward. The fight was happening near the outer edge of the lake, and consisted of thirty-two red dots, which Harry supposed were gnolls,

surrounding a single blue dot. This took them about ten minutes of quiet, careful walking through the woods, lest they alert the Gnolls of their presence. Gnolls had better-than average hearing, although not up to the level of elves, or even half elves.

And as they came upon the lake, Harry saw another pop up. This one looked as if he had just used his identification skill on the lake, which Harry had never done to a part of the world around him before.

Fisherman's Lake.

Despite the all too straightforward name, this is a popular place for men and women alike to commune with nature, and where inner wisdom can be achieved through the trials of fish craft.

Gain wisdom through fishing twenty hours (not consecutively).

Saying that, Harry fought the urge to facepalm, concentrating more on the battle which he could make out from here, although vaguely. He could see that one individual was dancing among the Gnolls, but beyond the fact that they were Gnolls, and the other individual was not, he couldn't make out any further details.

Khalid however could, and hissed in surprise. "M, m, my word! I, I, if that is who I think it is, we have h, h, had a stroke of luck. I think we s, s, should attack Harry, that is a f, f, fellow adventurer of some repute over t, t, there. I doubt he will be in a p, p, position to join our various quests, but making a g, g, good impression on him could be very u, u, useful for the future. P, p, particularly your future."

Given the emphasis Khalid placed on that, Harry understood to mean future thanks to his status as a son of the murderer hobo. Harry didn't know what to make of that, yet he was already inclined to help regardless. "Let's get it stuck in then, although Dynaheir I think will have to be careful with your area of effect spells."

"We'll come in from behind, spread out a little bit, but not overmuch. Dynaheir, stay behind us, and don't lob any spells until the three of us are stuck in with the Gnolls," Harry commanded quickly, outlining a plan, talking over Dynaheir's affronted hiss at the word 'lob' being used in conjunction with her. "There are way too many of them for us to even think of trying to pin in place, but if we can at the least get them to spread out away from that adventurer far enough, you can start using your smog smells to knock them out. You're going to be the key to this battle."

That caused Dynaheir's ire to disappear, and she nodded briskly.

"T, t, that, and the adventurer h, h, himself," Khalid spoke up again, amusement once more audible in his voice. "Y, y, you do not need to worry about h, h, him succumbing to the magic of our c, c, companion, Harry. T, t, trust me, his willpower is more t, t, than high enough. Unlike m, m, my own, or that of our companion h, h, here."

Minsc would indeed have an issue with Willpower, and in fact a very bad one if not for the fact that Boo helped him in that regard. The Miniature Giant Space Hamster gave Minsc near immunity to anything that attacked his mind. Stinking Cloud though didn't attack the mind directly, rather it attacked it through the nose, so he too would need to be on the lookout for the attack from his witch. Whereas

Harry was immune to it thanks to his Gamer's Mind and high Willpower score. It still stunk to blazes, but the mental assault aspect didn't bother him.

"Fine. You stay behind Minsc and me then, Khalid. Prioritize any gnolls that look to be trying to circle around us to get to Dynaheir. Minsc, when I tell you, fall back."

Again, Khalid looks somewhat amused, but didn't say anything, instead stringing his bow again, and lining up a shot firing quickly while Harry and Minsc raced forward, his first arrow in the air before they were a dozen paces away. Harry used a sword and shield, and on his order, Minsc did the same using a mace and shield. While Minsc didn't have any skills in sword and shield style a shield would still give him some defense, and against this many opponents that just made more sense in Harry's mind.

You have performed an attack on the back of an enemy formation engaged with another opponent. This constitutes a Flank Attack.

The enemy have a -65% chance to defend from the attacks of your party.

+70% chance to cause fear and confusion in the enemies that you directly attack. The more enemies that notice you, the more that fear will spread.

Harry felt something pass over his head and watched as the first smog spell hit among the mass of gnolls. Many of them began to falter, falling unconscious. Minsc took one directly in front of Harry with a blow from his mace to the side of the creature's head, and Harry whirled around him, sword up to block a blow that would've hit Minsc's shoulder from a gnoll that had turned faster than the others. His sword stabbed upward, taking the gnoll in the unprotected armpit, causing it to cry out in agony before Harry pulled his sword back, and let Minsc's mace take the creature in the head as it dropped its weapon and backed away.

The next second, Harry's shield came up automatically blocking a blow from a glaive from one of the other Gnolls, and Harry's sword sliced along his hands, noting absently that none of these Gnolls had very good equipment. Not even gauntlets of leather or something to block the blow, and his blow sliced cleanly along in the creature's knuckles dumping weapon and fingers to the ground.

A kick lashed out into another gnoll, this time empowered further by a Stupefy spell from Harry, a stupefy spell that smashed into the creature pointblank and sent him flying into several others, knocking them down in turn. Then he was busy blocking and dodging as more gnolls turned to him. Blows began to get through despite the gnolls also getting in one another's way, but both Harry and Minsc were wearing semi-decent armor: Harry having a chest plate plus his tower shield, and Minsc having the Chest Plate +1 they had taken from the gnoll fortress. They lost a quarter of a hit point that the armor blocked, but that was nothing.

Better, Harry could see on the map that many of the gnolls were down by Dynaheir's first spell, and many others were already turning yellow rather than red on his map. Several started to retreat around the edges of the mob, but Khalid's arrows flashed, followed by one of Dynaheir's spells.

A second later, a second spell flashed over Harry's head, another fog spell hitting the other side of the battlefield. The combination of spells knocked out enough of the gnolls now to allow Harry's Greater Observation skill glanced through the press of bodies to the adventurer. And when it did, Harry got a

shock. Because for the first time ever, he could not see someone's level. And considering he could see Jaheira and Khalid's pre-Curse of the Dread One level, that was disturbing.

Name: ????? drow

Class: Level ??? Range,

This drow ranger, is uncommonly skilled with the blade. He seems to be wielding two scimitars, the same kind of sword that Druids can use (don't ask why). His cloak and clothing are travel stained, but incredibly well-kept and what armor you can see underneath his cloak looks to be of exceptional quality. you can tell he is a Ranger rather than a warrior given how light that armor is, although to be fair, given his speed, he doesn't seem to need to worry about being hit.

More importantly than any of that is that this drow is so high-level that even this number of gnolls seems to be nothing more than a nuisance to him. He is completely undamaged, and at this point in the battle, has actually killed more of the Gnolls than your self, Minsc, Khalid, and Dynaheir's spells combined have knocked out of it.

Hint: be very very nice to this person. He could crush you like a bug.

Shaking his head to shift that pop up window away, Harry concentrated on the fight, hacking, slashing, stabbing. But within moments, it was clear that the last of the fight was going out of the gnolls like someone had punctured a small balloon with a large dagger. What Gnolls were still on their feet by this point in the fight were all fleeing. Harry quickly ordered Minsc to back away from the front, and switch to bow and arrow the better to make certain that none of them escaped. Dynaheir had been careful to keep the Stinking Clouds away from her companion, but the wind was slowly pushing it back toward them.

With Khalid and Minsc on both sides spreading out, and the lake and the deadly swords of the drow ranger in front, none of the conscious gnolls were able to escape. And then, Harry and the Ranger began the business of killing the unconscious.

"Thank you for your help, strangers. Admittedly, such rabble is of no real threat, but they came upon me as I was trying to find a place to stay for the night. Even rangers do not like to travel in torrential rains, and that is what my weather sense is telling me is going to hit soon. I hope all of you are able to get to wherever you are staying for the night before it arrives," the drow, a man of what looked like middle-age, stated.

Harry grimaced at that, looking over to Minsc, who shrugged his shoulders adding, "Minsc has not traveled the Sword Coast long enough to get a feel for the weather here like he had back in Rasheman. He cannot predict the weather so accurately as all that friend Harry. But given the name of this area and that it is autumn pushing into winter, it makes sense."

"Well then, thank you for the warning. And I'm sorry that we spoiled your fun. It... really didn't look like you needed us here," Harry admitted, causing the Ranger to laugh, and also look at him strangely as Harry held out his hand. "You were cutting them down like they were chaff before the scythe."

"H, h, he has no idea who you are, c, c, comrade" Khalid said from one side, making a sign that Harry looked at in some confusion as he moved forward. The Ranger, after a second's hesitation, did the same,

holding out his hand. "H, h, Harry, this is Drizzt. Drizzt D'orden. One o, o, of the deadliest rangers in the world, and one o, o, of the most renowned fighters alive."

Drizzt laughed, shaking his head as Dynaheir and Minsc also stared in surprise while Harry was somewhat stunned to meet the very example of a good drow he had used during his argument with Tyr and the other gods who had sent their presence into his mind.

"I admit, most people still see my race before they see my reputation, but your response was among one of the best I've had before I introduce myself, and that isn't even counting the fact you came to my aid as you did. But tell me, did you use some kind of Observation Skill on me a moment ago? I felt something unusual during the battle."

Harry's eyes widened in shock still more. Never before had anyone he'd used Greater Observation on been able to feel it, and he decided that he would take the words of his skill to heart as much as possible. "Yes I apologize, I have the skill Greater Observation, and I can't turn it off."

Again, Drizzt laughed, nodding his head in reply. "Oh, I understood it was something of the sort. I have two companions who have that skill themselves, and am quite used to the feeling. I've found it can be one of the most subtle, yet most helpful abilities. It's why I let them do all of the bartering. Well, that and my own race of course. Introducing yourself over and over again to every merchant you meet so they don't attempt to either spit at you or gather a angry band of peasants to lynch you becomes extremely annoying over time."

Harry nodded at that, falling silent for a second as Minsc asked his fellow ranger a question, still awed at meeting what amounted to a living legend. *And oh, the irony of this is so obvious it hurts.* He gave Khalid a stink eye, who simply smirked back at him, and Harry rolled his eyes at the half-elf's little joke at his expense.

As Harry was busy glaring at Khalid, Drizzt finished answering Minsc's question, wiping a somewhat bewildered expression off his face as he turned back to Harry and the half-elf Harper. "But I assume that since you are... a part of a certain playing troupe so to speak, that you are looking into the issues here in the Sword Coast? I must admit that I am simply passing through heading north. But I had considered staying here and looking into these issues until recently when talk of outright war between Balder's Gate and Amn seemed to be receding. Everything is still quite tense, but it is certainly better than it was even as little as a week and a half ago," Drizzt said, looking first at Khalid then at Harry, obviously wondering who was the leader here. "Which considering how much time it takes to get a message from Baldur's Gate to Athkatla is impressive."

"That would be our doing, yes. Well, finding the evidence anyway. We are nowhere near to the bottom of this conspiracy, but we discovered quite a bit of proof of tampering when we fought our way through the dungeon that was the Nashkel mines," and Dynaheir said dryly. "Thankfully it appears as if people everywhere have a certain amount of common sense, and no one with that most valuable commodity wants a war."

Drizzt's eyes narrowed at that, and he hummed thoughtfully. "The mines had changed into a dungeon? That is unusual, and very dangerous when it happens. Monsters moving into a fortress or village that has been abandoned and the world deeming it a dungeon is one thing. To turn someplace where miners are

still working and moving in and out of, that speaks of preparation, magic, and a good deal of connections with whatever monsters populated the dungeon. The magical aspect is most disturbing.”

He killed four gnolls with a single slash each of his swords, sending out some kind of attack that Harry’s Greater Observation Skill called ????? without any accompanying information, scaring Harry even more while Drizzt still looked pensive. This action though caused Harry, Minsc and Khalid to quickly turn back to their own grizzly work before Dynaheir’s spells began to fade. “You said it was a conspiracy. Then it perhaps is a good thing that I will not be staying around. Only one of my current companions is any good at solving problems that cannot be solved with the sword or fist.”

“As my companion said, we still don’t know who is behind it all, but we will be following a trail. Paperwork trail this time rather than an actual one. However, we barely escaped that dungeon by the skin of our teeth, and the various fights we’ve had since have only proven that we are ridiculously under leveled to keep following those particular breadcrumbs,” Harry said ruefully, his earlier moment of fear fading quickly thanks to Gamer’s Mind. And what he said was even the truth. He and the others had already agreed that they would need to spend some time leveling up before he had made with the priest of Lathander and Officer Vai.

“Well, if you think that, I will not inquire further. Although I will warn you, if your companion here has already not done so, that such conspiracies are not made up by men or women who are slow of thought. The more time you give them, the more time they will have to make other plans. And unfortunately, if they are determined to cause war between Balder’s Gate and Amn, they will find fertile ground. Amn is expansionist, and Baldur’s Gate is already far too powerful for many to like seeing, and arrogant in its might,” Drizzt said, then shook himself as the last of the unconscious Gnolls died. “I need to head on my way, and see if I can find a place to stay for the night. I was not at all exaggerating when I said the storm that is coming in tonight is going to be incredibly violent. There is a hut nearby for fishermen caught out in bad weather. I will stay there. And yourselves?”

“Beregost for now and for the foreseeable future, hopefully we make it in time. Like I said, we’re looking to level up for a bit. In fact, I would probably be inviting you back with us, if not for the fact that the locals already don’t like me much thanks to another companion of mine. One with a similar racial background to yourself,” Harry answered with a laugh.

To his surprise, Drizzt’s eyes hardened instantly and he glared at Harry, a scowl forming on his face as his fingers twitched towards his swords. “Then perhaps I misjudged you if you travel with one of my race, paladin,” he growled, nearly spitting the last word. “Did this drow seduce you, or was his or her money too good for you to pass up?”

“Neither,” Harry said, shaking his head in some surprise even as he backed away, holding his hands up peaceably. He did not want to fight this man, no sir. “We met in dangerous circumstances for us both, and made agreements that we have since kept.” He thought about trying to explain his friendship with Viconia, before shrugging his shoulders and simply stating that he had made a habit of becoming friendly with prickly folk.

That caused Dynaheir to snort, not realizing that Harry counted her as well as Edwin among that number. The smirk on Khalid’s face though said he understood that his wife was also probably counted among such prickly folk and agreed, although he would never say it aloud.

Drizzt glanced at Khalid, seeing the slight smile on his face and his eyes narrowed in confusion. "Truly?"

"T, t, truly. While I cannot say that Viconia is t, t, the most likable sort, and I have no doubt that s, s, she would be willing to do things that any of the r, r, rest of us would balk at, she has yet to d, ,d do such. When she g, g, gave her word to Harry, she has s, s, since kept it. Nor does she follow the s, s, spider queen, but rather Shar."

"...The Mistress of Loss isn't much better in my opinion, but very well. Your pardon Harry, but when it comes to my people, I can count those of us who have turned to the gods of light and good on the fingers of one hand," Drizzt said shaking his head. "There is a reason why I had to cut my way out of the Underdark, and only about half of those reasons are because I had made personal enemies. The rest was the spider bitch, and the fact that I refused to bow to her or her hateful society once I knew there was an alternative beyond her sociopathic son. And of course, because I am such a renegade, there are many among my race who wish to seek me out to earn her favor by presenting her my head."

Well, there were a few who wouldn't but this group was vanishingly small. Elistraee, goddess of freedom and moonlight, had a small following among the drow, and a few such had been able to escape to the surface. But that was one secret Drizzt would never reveal to anyone, let alone a group of strangers.

Harry nodded, shaking his head slightly. He had known going into this conversation that there were very few drow that had come to the surface, and even fewer individuals among them who could be called good. But Drizzt spoke of his home society with as much loathing and disgust as Viconia showed when speaking about her family, or perhaps even more. "A whole race devoted to evil. I suppose I'm still having trouble grasping that such a thing actually exists, let alone isn't simply a sign of intolerance."

"That speaks well of you, I suppose. I would be leading a much lonelier existence if not for people who could take me as they found me, and who would then form their own opinions of me over time rather than simply assuming I was like the rest of my race. But it is the truth, young Harry. While Lolth exists, all of drow society will remain as it always has since our ancestors followed her into exile: based on Lolth's twisted demands and her depraved belief system. It is pure evil, an evil built on hate, lack of empathy, and above all, personal ambition and status, a drive that pushes my folk to commit horrible atrocities against ourselves, let alone others, all in the name of rising in the eyes of other drow and Lolth. You can have pity for those of of my folk who are born into such a society and become twisted by it, I sometimes feel such."

Drizzt let his gaze harden as he looked at the young paladin. "But do not let that pity blind you to the fact most of my kind would sooner collar or slay you than converse with you. While not all of them would enjoy your pain, most would, and those that would not, would see selling you off or abusing you in some fashion as simply good business practice."

Reluctantly Harry nodded, understanding what Drizzt was saying. He had known that intellectually, but to hear it from a drow, and one who was quite famous, that the prejudice against the society he had grown up in had a point? That was startling, as not even Viconia had gone that far. *And I will need to allow it to color my responses to individuals and even groups who won't accept Viconia from now on, he* admitted with a sigh. "Thank you for your words Drizzt, but before you go, tell me at least that there aren't anymore gnoll groups like this about?"

“There are not. Or at least, there were none more than attacked me. I would determine this a war band, one that had been camping around here somewhere. I would say that you should perhaps look to discover where that camp could be, but with the storm coming, that might prove impossible. But if you are staying in Beregost, you should probably take evidence that there are such large bands of gnolls around. A band like this would not be large enough to take the town, but if they had built their numbers up more, say another hundred gnolls, or more? The town would be in serious danger.”

And Beregost is the center of the trade between Nashkel and Balder’s Gate. Destroying it, or even greatly damaging it would be a tremendous blow to that trade, even as it fights to resume now that the mines have been cleared. Damn it. Is this Iron Throne organization behind them to?

For a moment Harry thought that he would get another message about having discovered a clue. No such message came, making Harry wonder if his concerns on that score were false. *Or it could just be that it doesn’t add more information?* He waited a second to see if anything popped up from his Advanced Adventuring System, but nothing did, and he shook his head, said farewell to Drizzt, and then, as Drizzt left, began to use his Advanced Adventuring System to pluck the ears from each of the Gnolls.

But as he did, he got three new notifications, as the bodies of the dead gnolls all suddenly appeared once more on his map, pulsing a light green color, with a tiny number in each dot. Each notification was using a new term, ‘resource’ to describe gold, gnoll ears and the gnoll weapons.

You have moved to harvest a resource, the resource Gnoll Ear. There are sixty such ears available on your map. Would you like to harvest them all and place them in your Complex Item Box?

Yes/no?

The other resources all read pretty much the same, although the one about gold only mentioned twenty ‘resource points’ available, which Harry took to mean that only twenty of the gnolls carried gold currently. He also noted it said sixty such ears, but he didn’t think it meant both ears on each gnoll. Instead, it was reaching out past his line of sight and out around the running battle between Drizzt and the gnolls.

Harry took in the messages, then looked around at the others, particularly Dynaheir. “Everyone, move back a bit. My AAS just gave me an idea as to what connection there could be between the Complex Item Box and my Map skill.”

The others all looked quizzical, especially Minsc as he hadn’t been a part of that discussion, but they obeyed, moving well away from the battle. And as Harry clicked yes, they were very glad they had. There were a series of ‘ripppp!’ noises, as the left ears of all the gnolls was torn off in a bloody display. They floated into the air, ten moving together into groups all around the battlefield, before disappearing into the party’s shared Item Box.

“M, my word!” Khalid exclaimed. “That was impressive, a, a, although I remember you using your AAs s, s, skill to dress a, a, animals before. And even take b, b, bandit scalps. Never before d, d, d did we see something like that. I wonder w, w, why this time we did?”

“Perhaps because it was a Combination Skill as your new Leadership and Tactics sheet indicated?” Dynaheir mused. “Harry wasn’t touching each gnoll, rather it was his map which was letting his Complex Item Box interact with the world beyond Harry’s touch.”

“It also doesn’t have anything to do with how the party can interact with the Complex Item box. Several of those ears are pulled off bodies beyond a hundred feet away from me. But I wonder...” Harry hummed, then looked over at Minsc. “Minsc, touch one of the glaives. The Complex Item Box is supposed to be for our entire party so...”

When this happened, Minsc saw a similar notification as Harry had and Harry grinned as more than three dozen glaives rose into the air and then popped out of existence. As they did, Harry opened up the Complex Item Box, which was a secondary tab on his Item box screen, and he nodded firmly. “Yep, I’ll take that. Those glaives might not normally be worth much, but they have iron on them, and I would wager the blacksmith back in Beregost would like to see them. Fantastic.”

The Complex Item Box also worked to take coins off the body, although the coins pulling out of various places were not nearly as dangerous to be around as the glaives. “So, I think we’re done here, unless anyone thinks we should try and stay and bury the bodies? I’m somewhat disturbed by the idea of leaving so many bodies out here in the wild but...”

“N, n, no. We need to rush back to t, t, town.” Khalid was staring up at the nighttime sky, as was Minsc. “W, we can’t stay here any longer. T, t, the storm Drizzt told us of is nearly here, and w, w, we need to get under cover.”

Harry nodded, then with Dynaheir still shaking her head, turned and, with Minsc again in the lead, the quartet headed back towards Beregost as fast as possible.

OOOOOO

Back in Beregost at around the same time Harry and his companions slew the three adventurers-cum-bandits, Viconia and Imoen were having a somewhat minor confrontation in the marketplace in Beregost, the local market where produce and meats were sold rather than the jewels or jewelry that made the town famous. Because while the prejudice towards Viconia’s people was based on hard fact, as Harry would finally understand later that night, that didn’t mean that was the only prejudice out there against other races.

Nor did it mean that those prejudices would be just as accurate... or altogether rational.

“I’ll not sell you anything! Nothing to you, or that elven harlot you have with you. We know their ways around here, damned dirty elves! She’s no doubt here to seduce our husbands, drive us out of our homes!”

The middle aged harridan, a word that Imoen used with feeling if only in her own mind, who shouted this probably did have issues at home if Imoen was honest. If only because she currently wore a sneer on a only moderately attractive face stuck on a body that not even a puppy could love, let alone anything else. She looked like the sort who would almost instantly hate anyone prettier, of which she would undoubtedly find quite a lot of people. Whether or not the woman had any specific issues with her husband was beside the point, though, given that she was currently glaring at Viconia who had just picked up a tomato to test it’s firmness.

The fact the other local grocers were looking at this like midday TV back home was somewhat annoying too. It was very evident they had known this was coming, and had maybe even egged the woman on. Certainly none of them had tried to warn off the two foreign women from the harridan’s stall.

Fearing the worst, Imoen quickly grabbed Viconia by the wrist, hissing into one pointed ear. "Don't cause a scene please! We're nearly done shopping, then we can get out of here. We don't even really need her lettuce or tomatoes."

Viconia rolled her eyes, pulling out of Imoen's grip easily. As fast as Imoen could move, she had even less strength than Viconia. Yet instead of attacking the woman, as back home Viconia would have had any near merchant spoken to a daughter of the DeVir house like that, Viconia allowed her tongue to do the cutting. Although she did have to take a few seconds to remember to address herself as an elf would, with none of her original language or torture terminology involved.

"Old woman, whatever tales you have heard of elves, I assure you we do not go around stealing the husbands or wives of people we meet, not even if they annoy us. We are not nearly as promiscuous as you humans are in that territory. And frankly, from what I have heard of human menfolk, no husband of yours would be able to withstand the pleasures I can bring, let alone have the dexterity and staying power I require in my lovers." Viconia made it sound like even looking at the woman was enough to question such.

Viconia sneered, leaning forward, putting her assets on more display, and since neither she nor Imoen were currently wearing armor, that was quite effective. "I have no doubt that I could have your husband on his knees barking like a dog to serve me within seconds if he has to come home to someone with your features. But ask yourself why would I? After all, if your husband works here with you, he surely is not any great prize, either mentally or any other way."

That comment caused many a chuckle or a snarl of anger from the surrounding merchants. While most just enjoyed the show, a few would be on the locals were obviously on their fellow peasant's side. Imoen looked over at the closest of those, her glare causing him to twitch away from where he had been about to grab a knife.

By the she turned back, the woman across the stall had reached forward, as if to strangle Viconia. Viconia had taken a step back, and was still sneering at her. "Whatever is the matter? You do not like the truth? Or are you a monster, unable to use words to get your way you must frighten others with threats of force? I have to wonder why you assume you have such ability in the firstTTGAH!"

Viconia's taunting was interrupted by a splat, as the woman beamed her in the face with a tomato. It slowly slid off the now frozen elf's face, bouncing lightly off her chest to the ground as Viconia's eyes narrowed in fury.

I guess we're luck the Color Change charm couldn't be ruined like makeup, Imoen thought, trying hard not to laugh. But any urge to laugh was ended as Viconia stepped forward, grabbed another tomato, and then, before the woman could do anything, grabbed her by her blouse pulled her in close, and ground the tomato into the other woman's face. "How dare you, you fat slug! I willLI!"

It was probably a good think that Viconia's next taunt or threat went unheard, even if the method of interruption this time was just as bad as the first. The woman, half blind, had grabbed up a head of lettuce and smacked it into Viconia's face.

"Okay, that's enough!" Imoen wrapped her arms around the taller woman's waist, dragging her back, only to be slapped in the head by the same, now bruised, head of lettuce. "Oh you bitch!"

At that point, though, the other civilians got off their collective asses, and rushed to separate the three women. This did not save the grocer's stall, her dignity, or that of the two adventuresses, who walked away with a lot of glares sent their way, and dripping tomato juice, bits of lettuce and pickle juice everywhere.

"Well, I'm glad that you only decided to cut her up with your tongue rather than smash your brain and with your warhammer. But the outcome isn't much less messy," Imoen drawled, pulling a bit of lettuce from her leather blouse. "Ugh. I doubt we're going to be able to do the shopping from now on."

"Feh, then perhaps there is something to be said for what has occurred. While I somewhat enjoy cooking, shopping is beneath me. But as for your aspersion, while I am not like the rest of you, willing to let slurs and remarks of that nature pass, neither am I a wild beast. I will always respond to violence with violence, of course, but neither will I instigate such against weaklings like these peasants. Such is beneath me."

Viconia snorted, then smiled wryly. "Now, if she had been the first merchant we met, and thus interacting with that potato-faced harlot had caused the others to stop selling to us, and thus taking away the chance of another Harry Potter meal, things will be very different. I would be well within my rights at that point to gut her like a fish while her husband watches on his knees, begging to hold the sacrificial bowl for me as I did it."

"Ooff...while I'm pretty certain you're joking, I can also tell that you're kind of not, and that is quite scary. Well done," Imoen said, almost admiring the other woman's ability with words. While also, yes, being very scared that Viconia actually wasn't joking at all. *Then again, given her looks, maybe Viconia is right, maybe she could have the man on his knees at least.*

"Bah, I will admit I would no longer go through such a thing, nor did I ever take joy in it. But I am what I am, and I refuse to apologize for it. I'm willing to go along and get along to a certain degree, even hide my nature as best I can to live a peaceful life. And I have to admit that there has been actually moments of actual good humor and amusement since meeting Harry. But there is a limit to my forbearance."

"That limit still being at the outskirts of Baldur's Gate?" Imoen asked.

"You see what we are dealing with even here, when we still keep certain issues a secret to the vast majority of the townsfolk. Rumors alone are enough occasionally. There is no way that this..." Viconia gestured pinching her currently pale skin on one forearm. "Would be able to hide me among such masses. No, I will turn no side and leave the group if or when you all reach it would be proving too dangerous for you and for me."

Imoen sighed, but let the subject fade, heading back to the house they had taken over for their stay here. Despite how long it'd taken them to find all of the supplies they'd wanted in terms of food not just for that evening but going forward, they were still the first pair back, exchanging silent nods with Jaheira, who turned toward them from the fireplace as the door opened. The half elven woman had just started a fire and the interior of the house they were staying in for now looked far cleaner than it had when they'd left, and there were actually a few chairs around the place that had not been there earlier.

"Yes, well, I wasn't getting anywhere with trying to break that cipher. I recognize portions of it, but each time I tried to apply a similar cipher I've dealt with in the past, it leads me nowhere. I'm beginning to

think that was deliberate, that such hints were left there on purpose.” Jaheira grumbled. “The least I could do is clean this place from top to bottom and find some new furniture for us all. We are going to stay here for a while, after all. Perhaps even into winter. And whatever happened to you two? You look like you lost a fight with a farm.”

“I will have you know we won that battle, or at least the grocer’s stall lost. Serves her right, the harridan,” Viconia grumbled as she trooped through the sitting room into the kitchen, where she quickly began to put the groceries and supplies away.

“Yeah, I gotta say we didn’t have much fun either. A few relatively easy jobs for Vai, and then shopping, where we met the local Chief Bitch. Frankly I wager Harry would see that was her title if he looked at her. I don’t suppose you found time to refill the bath, did you?”

“I did, although you will have to heat the water. Then again, I doubt that you’ll have any trouble with that,” Jaheira snorted.

“True that!” Imoen instantly turned, racing upstairs to the bath even as Viconia shouted about how she should be allowed to take a bath first. This went ignored by Imoen much to Viconia’s ire, and a quick fire spell later, the water was steaming and just perfect to bathe in, as well as soothing a few sore muscles Imoen had for some reason. It didn’t do anything for the hit to her health, but that was fine by Imoen, who was practically at full health previously.

Imoen came back downstairs to find that Edwin had returned with a companion. Luckily, while Imoen didn’t have anything like Harry’s Greater Observation skill, she could still see someone was a halfling rather than a child after so long in this world. Otherwise the teasing would have been the stuff of legends and gone on just long enough for her to ascertain if there was anything actually going on prior to her sword coming out.

“Hey Edwin, who’s the half-pint?” She asked as she came down the stairs.

“If I’m half, does that mean you’re like, two thirds? I like the hair though, it’s amazing, what did you do to it to make it so pink? Do you think you could do it to mine? I’m Alora by the way, I met Edwin here, he’s a little gruff, but he’s really smart, and seems to know a lot about other places, places I haven’t been yet, we got to talking, and I helped him with the that little weird word problem of yours, which I think is kind of cool!” Alora babbled. “I’d run into something somewhat similar before when I accidentally seem to have found someone else’s property on my person.”

“She did? And that was a good zing about me being two-thirds,” Imoen said, cheerfully reaching over to shake the halfling’s hand. “And don’t you just hate it when that happens? I mean, it isn’t your fault if something they forgot to nail down ends up somewhere else.”

“Right!? It’s not like I need to have it or something and I always return whatever it is if it’s been missed,” Alora answered cheerily.

That caused Imoen to laugh while Jaheira and Viconia were both looking at Edwin in some bemusement. “It really is. But tell me how you helped our big scary wizard here with the cipher.”

“Hah! Woman, I can be terrifying if I wish to be, you have yet to see me so. Nor, unless you are offering, have you ever seen whether I am big or not. Shall I take your interest in that topic as a request?” Edwin taunted.

Imoen simply rolled her eyes, nudging Alora, as the two of them got to talking, shifting away from the cipher, and chattering about everything.

Jaheira stared at the two of them, then over at Edwin, her eyes narrowed in anger. “You did this. There are now two of them.”

“Tell me something I do not know. But given how much thin ice we are already on with the ignorant yokels around here, I could hardly have ‘convinced’ Alora to simply give me the information. She had no desire to simply sell it, and then she became so interested in the rest of you. What was I to do then, when even my silver tongue failed for lack of target?” Edwin answered, although it sounded weak even as he said it. That was a very weak excuse after all, and one that Jaheira saw straight through.

About an hour later, the four drenched adventurers stared in shock at the sight of Edwin answering each of a young halflings’ questions about magic and the cities he had seen in seeming good humor while Imoen sat beside them, tossing in her own questions or answers.

“What am I watching?” Harry whispered, stunned both by the cheery grin on the young halfling’s face and the faint smile on Edwin’s. Not even his Greater Observation’s note could stun him as much as what he was seeing right now.

“A miracle in the making?” Dynaheir asked quizzically.

“Minsc is also confused. Edwin was one of the most irritated by that fellow, Garrick, and yet he is putting up with the tiny halflings’ word assault?”

Harry shrugged, and moved forward, gaining Edwin's attention with a wave of the hand.

Edwin stiffened, as if he had been caught out doing something he shouldn't, although considering the fact he was a Red Wizard of Thay, that would probably be the majority of the time. *Although it might be that he knows he's not exactly acting like a Red Wizard right now* Harry thought to himself with a chuckle. Harry however did not call him out on it, simply sitting in one of the chairs by the fire, smiling in delight as the heat of the fire permeated his back, unequipping his armor and setting it aside. “We had a productive day, what about you all? And who's your little friend, Edwin?”

“I’ll have you know I'm quite tall for my folk,” the young halflings said cheerily, thrusting her hand out and almost into Harry's stomach. “I'm Alora how do you do?”

Name: Alora

Race: Halfling

Gender: Female

Class: Level 7 Thief

A true free spirit, Alora looks to have somehow latched onto Edwin and vice-versa. How the two diametrically opposite personalities have seemingly meshed together in so short a time is anyone's guess, but perhaps it points to further depths of the Red Wizard from Thay? Who knows?

What is certain though is that Alora is as flighty as she is chatty, but is just as fast with her hands as she is with her tongue. Don't let her lower level fool you, she looks to be a much better sneaky steal type of thief than Imoen. Give her a good enough weapon though, and backstab could be a big problem coming from this girl.

While somewhat confused at not seeing any kind of Trust/Friendship meter, Harry smiled at that, shook her hand, and then looked over to Edwin again. Edwin coughed a little, still looking a little guilty. "Well, I have had a productive day, mostly thanks to Alora here. I've completely deciphered that paperwork we found. It reads as a list of supplies and the places they were sent, although the names of the places means nothing to me. Tazok is apparently the next name on the chain as he was mentioned several times, and so is the Blacktalon mercenary group, who we have already had one run-in with. But actual locations are simply names, without anything to decipher their real locations. You can look it over if you wish."

Even knowing he should, Harry didn't have any desire to do so right now, although he didn't say anything right now. There would be time enough for that when they could actually act on the intelligence within. Right now, pinned to Beregost, they couldn't.

"Yep," Alora said with a nod. "Someone mixed written out thieves cant and then something from alchemist's. I bet they never expected someone to know about both like me, I know about them because my cousins are alchemists or well he tried to be anyway and I've spent a lot of time near thieves, I really don't like them, they're kind of silly, like everything is about gold or profit with them. Even those who just are curious, they prefer to be curious about jewels and gold rather than just interesting stuff. So sad. Anyway, I..."

The girls chatter brought a smile to Harry's face, and a wry grimace on Edwin's, although for some reason Harry felt that was somewhat forced. Imoen's grin though wasn't at all, and the look on his surrogate sister's face told Harry she had just found a new best friend. *Well, either they will get along famously or they will drive us insane* admitted. *I'm quite frankly uncertain that those are two mutually exclusive options.*

Despite Alora's presence, eventually the quartet of combatants were relaxed enough to tell the rest about the two missions they had completed for the locals. And that they had met Drizzt, who, Harry was quick to point out, was not staying in the territory. Something that had Viconia breathing a sigh of relief and Alora pouting at the fact she missed the chance to meet such a famous adventurer.

"But D'Orden's presence will no doubt have something to do with the lack of response from the Iron Throne that is behind the push toward war we have begun to," Jaheira mused, causing everyone, even her husband to simply stare, then make 'ahah' noises as they realized what she was saying. She sighed, shaking her head sadly "Really? Even you, Khalid? You should know that a warrior like Drizzt, in particular when he is traveling with that group of friends of his, is akin to a weapon of mass destruction. Undoubtedly the Iron Throne's leaders are smart enough to realize that, and lay low for a time to let him

leave the area, even when faced with a setback like the ones we have given them of late. Mind you, I doubt they have heard of our taking {the wizard} here in Beregost yet, but even so.”

“So we might have a larger window of opportunity to keep acting than we thought before facing organized opposition. Though I’m still of the opinion we need to raise our levels,” Harry mused, looking away from Jaheira’s unamused gaze.

Everyone there agreed, even Alora, who didn’t really know what she was agreeing with. A fact that brought Harry’s attention back to her, and he pushed past his humor at her presence to look at Edwin, saying simply, “You know this complicates things a lot if she decides to stick around right? Are you sure we can’t just make a deal with you for your help with the cipher, Alora?”

“Nope. It sounds like you are all doing quite a lot of stuff, and I really like the idea of fighting the good fight at the moment, and besides that, this whole idea of some kind of conspiracy is really interesting, like learning about that weird group that begins with Z. But you don’t have to worry about me spilling your secrets or anything.” Alora beamed at Harry, a bright, guileless grin that seemed to be a racial trait of halflings, but which Harry had yet to see, not having interacted with any young halflings before this. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

At that, Harry received a notification from his Advanced Adventuring System.

Congratulations...?

You have reached the ‘friend’ relationship level with Alora.

What the hell?! That was too fast! But Alora seemed to be the kind who trusts easily, gives her word easily, and perhaps forgets about it just as easily. Do not take this notification, or the fact she is your friend to heart, even though she probably can already...

Harry’s reading of the notification was interrupted as Alora gaped, staring at what she saw in front of her. “Oohhh wow, what is this! What in the heck?! Some kind of skill, I can join your party? Fun!” With that she reached forward, pouting as her hand passed through the box in front of her.

Somewhat stunned, Harry kept reading the notification in front of him.

Good grief.

Would you like to add Alora to your party?

Jaheira wasn’t the only one to gape at Alora and then to stare at Harry then who rapidly shook his head. “Don’t look at me! She’s the one that just went from stranger to friend all in one go. I didn’t even see her Trust/Respect points when Edwin introduced us first, she was just a random adventurer, like the priests we’ve met and so forth!”

“I think we forgot something when we were talking about your AAS skill in the past, Harry. How it would react to someone who is just a little too trusting, and far too quick to befriend you,” Jaheira sighed, shaking her head.

“Now? She already knows about one of my major secrets,” Harry said slipping into a chair. “What do you think you would be able to give me your word that you won’t share my secrets?”

“Well I could, but I might forget. And Yondalla isn’t the kind to make someone stick to something like that, you know? So maybe it’s better all around if I don’t? What’s the big deal anyway, so you’ve got this really cool system, who’s going to care about that?” Alora asked glibly.

“A lot of people, for too many reasons to go into right now. However, I have a solution,” Edwin began. “Thanks to... my own research and observations, I believe I have discovered a way to create a magical item that will forcefully keep your secret. If I...or Dynaheir.... Enchant an item with enough intent-based magic itself to react if the oath is broken, then perhaps we will not have to take steps with Alora,” Edwin stated.

He wasn’t nearly as certain as he sounded that his idea in that vein would work. Although oath-binding items were something that had been around for centuries, they were hard to make, and usually required a dedicated Enchanter, a mage who specialized in creating magical items, and a lot of reagents. Edwin was a Conjuror. Dynaheir was an Invoker. Neither school specialized in items. But he understood the need for secrecy when it came to Harry’s skills, and in no way wanted to have to kill Alora if they ever separated.

Sighing, Harry looked over at Imoen, who threw an arm around Alora’s shoulder. She seemed to already consider the halfling a friend, which said a lot about his ‘sister’s’ personality in his opinion. “Don’t look at me. I think Alora’s gonna be a lot of help to us, even if you set aside the cypher thing. I think here we just need to take a chance here.”

The others were split into two camps. One, Jaheira, Khalid Dynaheir and Viconia did not seem to want to take the chance, but knew it was too late. Alora had already literally friended her way into the secret. Edwin, Imoen and Minsc were fine with it. *The only way to keep it might be to Obliviate her... but we can put that off until she decides to leave us, I guess. That would solve the problem long term, although the item Edwin describes might help in the short term so she won’t accidentally blab about the AAS to anyone while she’s with us.*

“Fine. But let’s keep at least some of our own secrets separate for now,” Harry decided, looking over at Imoen and then to the two Harpers and Viconia. There were at least three more things they should keep secret after all: the fact two of them were harpers, the Blood Mage spells, and Viconia being a drow.

The others all nodded agreement, and Harry sighed, then gestured for Jaheira and Imoen to speak up. “You two explain the AAS and why we want to keep it a secret. I want to get dinner started.” Outside the wind picked up to the point of howling, as the rain began to fall in torrents. “We might be here for a while, but at least we can start the night with a good meal before getting down to examining Alora’s stats and everything.”

He was already turning away before Alora began to pepper the twosome with questions on what Harry meant by that, but he still heard Jaheira’s grumbling vow of vengeance for leaving her with the two chatterboxes.

Dynaheir still looked as if she disapproved but Harry, getting no input from his Greater Observation skill about her current feelings, had to wonder if that was because Dynaheir disapproved of adding another chatterbox to their group, or if she disapproved of the idea that such an innocent, if that was the right word, considering Alora was also a thief, Harry wasn’t

certain, halfling girl could be a friend of Edwin's. For his part though, Harry found it kind of funny, and he had more important things on his mind in any event. Not just the notes that Edwin had translated, but food at present.

With a chuckle, he left the others in the sitting room, his footsteps speeding up as the conversation turned to the furniture that Jaheira had bought. It was simple, cheap, and durable, but the would-be interior designers among them were quite annoyed that they had not been asked their opinions on it. "Especially since you used the party's funds rather than your personal funds," Dynaheir argued.

"You say that as if I have another source of funds. Khalid and I donated our money to the party before we even met Minsc, let alone the rest of you," Jaheira retorted. "And no offense to you, large one, but finding furniture in town that fits one of your dimensions is not easy."

"Minsc understands, his body might be tiny in comparison to his desire to kick the butts of evil, but it is still quite large," Minsc admitted.

"That is beside the point," Edwin opined, with Imoen joining in. "Comfort is something I demand in anything I am supposed to use for any appreciable lack of time, and as we will be here for a few months at least, these peasant chairs are not suitable."

Shaking his head, Harry had only three thoughts on the furniture Jaheira had bought. One, it explained why he had noticed the party's money going down, and he was happy it was only for such a small amount. Two, they looked more comfortable than any of the chairs he'd been allowed to use at the Dursleys, or the benches in the dining hall in Hogwarts.

The third he voiced aloud as he opened his Item box and laid out his cooking utensils, comparing them to the ones which had been in the kitchen when they had cleared the building of spiders. "I wonder if I could stick that kind of furniture into my system item box? And yep, no knives here. I wonder if Landrin took them with her, or tried to use them on the spiders?"

Landrin was the owner of the house who had given Imoen and Harry the quest to clear out her house of large spiders. She was still waiting in the Friendly Arm Inn for their in-person word that the deed was done. But for now, Harry doubted she would care if they used her house.

"If a normal peasant attempted to take on a giant spider with a kitchen knife, I would most like to hear how they managed to survive. The spoons and utensils at least are still usable. But why are you thinking about putting furniture in your Complex Item Box? It sounds rather foolish, even if there is no weight limit in that version of the Item box." A female voice intoned from behind.

Harry stiffened. Not because the voice was unwelcome, but because of the accompanying touch to the back of his neck from delicate fingers.

He turned his head slightly to watch Viconia move past him, her body brushing against his side as she did, showing again that while she had the same to-die-for legs that most elves and half-

elf women seemed to have, she also had a bit more up top. Still ridiculously perky, but bigger, her waist a bit thinner than a human's her hips not quite as wide, but her rear, though small, amazingly well-formed. This was all on display now, as she wore a tight pair of leather leggings that looked painted on and a loose blouse that hung off her curves, its neckline so loose it was just this side of indecent. It wasn't clinging to her, but Viconia's currently pale skin still looked wet to the touch, and her long silver hair was matted against her neck.

Looking at the disguised drow, Harry did not need his Greater Observation to tell him she was in a flirtatious mood.

While Viconia is not someone who ever dresses down, while on the surface she has gotten into the habit of hiding as much of her body as possible from those around her. Even with the Color Change spell still in place, there can only be one reason why Viconia is dressed like this. The woman is out to play, and you are either her target or fellow player.

Choose wisely.

The shutters on the windows rattled badly as the wind outside picked up still more, the sound of rain growing louder, interrupting Harry's appreciation of his companion. "Did you have a nice bath? I'm surprised that you haven't joined the discussion out there."

"Jaheira bypassed all such talk and bought the furniture already. I doubt they are returnable, and all but Edwin will be unwilling to spend more money on something like that. Unless your comment on your Complex Item Box means we can keep such after we leave? But why would we?" she opened a few of the cabinets, showing the supplies she and Imoen had bought earlier. "And what exactly are we going to be making tonight?"

Pleased to have someone in the party you actually enjoyed cooking, even if she wasn't as good as Harry, Harry looked over the ingredients, then began to smile a bit. "You bought a lot of meat, so let's use some of that right away. And I see there's some dough in there as well. Have you ever heard of a Beef Wellington?"

Viconia shook her head, her smile widening slightly, causing Harry to flush a bit, before turning away as he began to pull out the meat before returning to Viconia's original question. He explained what he and the others had discovered about his newest skill, and Viconia frowned thoughtfully. "That is fascinating. It will make transporting weapons to be sold certainly much easier. Were you able to sell them by the way yet?"

When Harry indicated no with a wave of his hand, before getting down to cutting, Viconia quickly joined him, and the pair of them began to work on first seasoning the meat and creating a paste of some kind to go around it with Harry interspersing directions, conversation shifting from his Complex item box to whether or not it would work for furniture's and other things. "That would be impressively amusing. If you were a merchant, you would be a one-man convoy. But as it is, perhaps we should look around town for ways to make roughing it easier that most adventurers cannot use? Perhaps entire beds, or massive tents?"

“That sounds far too much like we wouldn’t be really roughing it any longer, but it’s a possibility. I am wondering about supplies too, but more than that, I am still wondering if there is more to the connection between map and Complex item box. Like I said, it wasn’t just Complex Item Box that activated when I tried to pull the gnoll ears off. If it was, it wouldn’t have been nearly as visibly messy. Instead Complex Item Box seemed to work through my map skill.”

“True, I was looking at it from the perspective of the box rather than the map,” Viconia mused, seemingly not noticing how her body was pressing up against Harry’s first second, so much so that Harry could feel the contours of her breasts pressing into his arms. And as she did, he suddenly became very, very aware that she was not wearing a bra of any kind under her current thin shift. *Is that her nipple!?* Certainly some part of the breast currently pressing against him was slowly turning harder.

You have earned 30 Interest points from Viconia.

She appreciates your reaction to her flirting, no matter how controlled.

Busy reading his notification, Harry did not see Viconia’s smirk as she moved away from Harry, quite pleased with his sudden stiffness in more than one direction. *Well, at least down there, Harry is as built as other lovers of the human persuasion I’ve taken before.* Viconia had told Imoen the truth earlier that day when Imoen had tried to question her about her intentions. She was no way interested in getting into a romance with someone. But the idea of having a strong... friendship... with Harry, something she was coming closer to admitting was quite nice to have? Well having that friendship include certain physical benefits, that she was quite interested in.

“Oh, by the way, you might find this amusing,” Harry said, trying to change the subject and the direction of his own thoughts. “I mentioned how we met Drizzt, but I didn’t say that before that, my Greater Observation skill picked up something on the Fisherman’s Lake. It said that if I finished for twenty hours, not consecutively thankfully, I would gain a point in wisdom.”

Viconia blinked, all her thoughts on flirting with Harry fading for second at the sheer strangeness of what he just said. “I’m sorry, what?”

“When you think about it, it makes sense. Wisdom isn’t so much wrong knowledge or intelligence, but has more to do with how you view the world, your general thoughtfulness and sense of calm, right? And according to Khalid, fishermen usually are among the calmest people you’ll ever meet.”

“I wouldn’t know, fishing in the Underdark is not safe, nor is even getting close to any of the open bodies of water, even those my society controls,” Viconia stated, frowning and thought. “But this is not the first time that your Greater Observation has been able to do something like that, correct? You were able to pick out legumes and so forth when in the wild. I think you or one of the others mentioned that.”

“Sort of. I got the Woodcraft skill once Minsc joined our party thanks to the whole skill sharing thing. I can’t say I’m very good at it, but it is something I can train in.” Harry thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “That kind of thing would probably react just like the gnoll ears did. If I pluck one, maybe the Complex item box and mapmaker would allow me to pull out others in the area even if I haven’t spotted them but they are within my map’s range. It certainly pulled a few more ears that were out of my sight. Good thinking.”

“And you said that the Complex item box’s notification said ‘resource,’” Viconia mused, humming in thought. “There is something about that term which is niggling at the back of my mind like a fat moth that has just tried to pass through a spider’s web. But I cannot bring it to mind at present.”

Filing that aside for the moment, as she leaned back into Harry’s back and sighed, whispering into his ear, “You have yet to tell me what this Beef Wellington is. Is this going to be another fantastic treat?”

Another, courser woman might have said something about enjoying Harry’s meats, or some such, oh but Viconia disdained such simple wordplay.

But the action from Harry was all she could wish for. He stiffened again, but instead of trying to shift away or stammer, he turned his head to look at her, actually winking at her despite the faint flush on his face. “You will just have to see. Why don’t you work on a side dish? A salad or something with those vegetables. I will need your help when it comes to rolling out the pastry, it’s got to be flaky and thin, but I need to get this paste just right first.”

“I dislike secrets, but I suppose when it comes to your food, I am more than willing to go along with things for now.”

Viconia moved away from him, deliberately trailing her body along Harry’s back and side as she did.

This the last time the two of them flirted as they began to make the meal. Harry quickly began to respond, something which Viconia enjoyed, feeling Harry touch her shoulder or side. To Viconia, the best part was when Harry or come up behind her at one point to look at how she was stirring the salad dressing.

About ten minutes into their flirting, Harry began seeing small hints from his Perception and Sexual Awareness skills, the skills he had picked up after sleeping with the elder dryad near the gnoll fortress. The first told him Viconia would not appreciate anything truly crude or overt just yet.

Viconia is someone who enjoys the chase, the flirting and buildup, just as much as the culmination. She might be into causing or enjoying some pain, but only later, when your trust has built up even more than it already has. For now, take it slow, and see which one of you breaks first and goes for the gold. With Viconia, it’s hard to tell if she wants to be the one to

wear you down or vice versa, and regardless of the outcome, she'll probably claim it was all her own idea in the first place. Women.

That message came from his Perception skill, and Harry was amused to see the message was in pink. But more importantly, Harry's sexual awareness actually highlighted Viconia's body in his sight with a few question marks, with tiny percentage scores next to them.

Greatly daring, Harry nuzzled against one of those marks, which was behind Viconia's left ear. Why her left ear had such a mark and her right didn't, he had no idea, but he wasn't going to question it as he made to sniff appreciatively. "I think we're going to need to add whatever soap you found to our supplies, it smells amazing. Or is that just you in general?"

Viconia visibly shivered, biting her lip for a moment even while her hands kept on moving, her body responding to the nuzzle and the whisper of Harry's breath over her ear. "Mmm... I believe it is just the soap but thank you for the compliment, Harry."

Her body stiffened, and a low moan came from her as Harry surprised her by laying a kiss right behind her ear. "Well, you know there's only one way to find out, hmm? Work our bodies so hard that soap fades away, so all I smell, see... or feel is you..."

Then Harry was moving away, leaving Viconia a bit hot and bothered, but with a genuine grin on her face and the notification of gaining 100 Interest blinking in Harry's gaze along with another observation from his Perception skill. Both messages appeared in pink, surprisingly.

While a bit forced, Viconia appreciates your words and the image that put in her mind. She also is very impressed you were able to find one of her most sensitive spots so quickly. You've slightly turned the tables on her, though don't get used to it.

Viconia greatly appreciates that you know how to play in the first place, and that you aren't acting like a lustful animal the moment she shows real interest in you, while also showing real skill in reading her body. She might take this as a challenge...

But they never went past that. While Harry was getting into this whole flirting in the kitchen thing and Viconia was just enjoying herself full stop, both of them aware of the open doorway to the sitting room, the laughter and chatter of the others. Both of which grew louder, overriding the sounds of the storm outside as Dynaheir and Jaheira seemed to slowly be losing their patience with the pair of thieves.

More than once, a shout from that room would pause both of their activities, with the most loudest being, "No you must not steal Boo away from Minsc! Boo is my animal companion, and I will not give him up to your small but dexterous hands. Boo, what have I told you about taking treats from others?"

To say that put a slight damper on things was like saying the storm outside was a mere Drizzt. But still, both enjoyed it, as well as the knowledge that it signified a change in their friendship, even though Harry was somewhat bemused that there had been no talk of emotions or

anything similar. He put that down to Viconia's past though, and just enjoyed the time for what it was, and, about an hour and a half later, Harry finished with what he called the Beef Wellington.

It smelled amazing, and even Alora and Jaheira, neither of whom truly enjoyed red meat all that much, ate eagerly.

As they dived into the meal, Jaheira noticed how Viconia and Harry sat close together, as did Imoen and Dynaheir. All three women exchanged glances, wondering what was going on there, but saying nothing for various reasons. Imoen, because she was going to bring it up with Harry the next time they were alone regardless. Jaheira, because she wanted more information before butting in if need be, and Dynaheir because she was very much afraid she knew what was going on, and was already making plans to try and make certain that Viconia could not influence Harry overmuch.

I must keep Harry from becoming a fallen paladin. That is what my vision quest brought me to the Sword Coast to do, and I will do it!

Unaware of this, Harry let his hand rest lightly on Viconia's thigh for a second before releasing it as he thanked her for her help in the kitchen, then brought both his hands up to start eating, asking at the same time, "So we didn't ask earlier, but are there any other jobs in the town to do?"

"Vai said something about a bandit group nearby that she wanted to toss us at. She said it was almost certainly tied into the rest of the troubles plaguing the road and the iron intake issue," Imoen said, pausing as Alora almost cackled, shaking her head in delight at the term. Evidently the halfling liked wordplay. Harry simply prayed she wasn't into puns, nor was he alone in this. "She did say there were going to be a few little jobs around the place but that was the biggest one."

"Hmm... Okay, I think going forward, we're going to want to... see to repairing some of the equipment we've gathered." Harry said, changing what he wanted to say with a brief glance in Alora's direction. "My shield could use a major touchup, and that full plate armor we acquired in the battle against Tranzig and his enforcers also needs to be repaired." He looked over at Minsc. "Will you want that suit? My own personal preference in a fight is to move a lot more than simply take blows, but a suit of full plate armor might suit you."

Thankfully the magic of this world meant that one size fit all most of the time when it came to adventurer's gear. The suit would simply resize itself to fit Minsc's massive frame. That wasn't the case with civilian stuff, but Harry didn't care about that or the why of it.

Minsc laughed thoroughly, thumping his massive chest. "Not at all, friend Harry! The chest plate that we already have for Minsc will do. Minsc is a Ranger first and foremost. While his large frame makes avoiding strikes in head-to-stomach fighting somewhat harder, he would be unable

to perform his duties as a Ranger in scouting ahead if he was wearing full plate. And changing into armor mid battle is silly. Minsc would like a better set of gauntlets, that is all.”

“F, f, full plate armor is not for everyone. It takes s, s, some training, Harry, and it will weigh you down r, r, regardless of your overall strength, even someone as s, s, strong as you,” Khalid warned. “We might j, j, just wish to sell it. It w, w, w,ill undoubtedly fetch a fantastic price, and w, w, we can then buy something later but which is m, m, magically reinforced.”

“Maybe. Let’s wait on that. I would wager anything that raising our reputation with Vai and the townsfolk will help us get a better deal when we go back to the blacksmith even better than my Barter skill,” Harry decided, shaking his head. But if Minsc didn’t want that armor, Harry thought he might. He had been deeply impressed by how well that armor had protected their opponent during the fight in the manor.

Well, after the fact anyway. At the time, I was bloody furious that most of my strikes didn’t even bothered the man, despite using a Long Sword +1 at the time.

“We also have to look at leveling our stats and simply leveling up,” Harry continued aloud.

“Heck yes! Do you know how cool it is to be able to see our progress like that, I mean that’s so amazing, I have so many ideas to add to my Dexterity and maybe even my Endurance. I mean if I see my progress, then it’s not like I’m running for no reason or something. That’s so fun!” Alora exclaimed.

“While I refuse to act anywhere near as... furiously ebullient as the halfling, I have to admit that idea has some merit for me as well,” Viconia stated, not stating what actual stat she wanted most to raise, that being her Strength. She would never admit that to those who didn’t already know it.

Imoen was hasty to add her own agreement, the furious growl coming from the girl making even Alora back up a bit, but Harry understood. “All right, Minsc said he knows a lot of strength exercises, so first thing in the morning, I think he should show us those, and I’m almost certain my Advanced Adventuring System will be able to tell us if we can use those exercises to build up her strength, and if so how long. The four of us,” Harry gestured to the group he been traveling with that day, “also discovered that fishing can actually add to wisdom.”

Practically everyone there had some kind of response to that, which Harry smirked as he listened to, before stiffening slightly as Viconia, the only one who didn’t have an opinion, began to playfully knead his thigh with one hand as if she was imitating a kitten, first slowly dragging her fingers along his thigh, then resting her his hand her hand there, squeezing gently then doing it again. The touches sent a fire straight to Harry’s groin, but he was able to control himself while Jaheira mused aloud that there could be other ways to raise their stats like that with access to Harry’s Advanced Adventuring System. “And have I mentioned how broken that skill is in the past few days? I love it very much obviously, but I would be remiss if I did not mention it on occasion.”

Harry snickered at Jaheira's droll tone, but inwardly, he was still quite happy that she had become a part of his real 'party' according to his AAS skill. It made things a lot easier but more than that, breaking down her walls and making Jaheira a true friend was perhaps the biggest mountain he had yet to climb on this journey. "Just because it's broken doesn't mean that any of us are going to stop using it does it?"

The resounding no he got from everyone there, with Alora being the loudest voice, and the one with the brightest grin. "In that case once the storm ends we should probably split up again. Imoen, Khalid, Jaheira, you four will remain in town to do whatever small jobs the locals have for us with Jaheira in charge."

Since that would have happened anyway, none of the three had any objections to that. Although Imoen promised to prank Jaheira under her breath if she kept on looking so dang smug about it.

"I know the two of you have said that you've tried to raise your stats before and had it blocked by the Curse of the Dread One, but that was before you joined my party. And I know that you can't really level up because of that curse, but we haven't tested whether or not you can gain stats, have we? Maybe my Advanced Adventuring System will be able to somehow bypass that curse in this one way. It's worth a try. And given what else we'll be doing, Jaheira, you probably won't have healing spells to use in the field anyway."

Jaheira frowned at that, but nodded understanding that Harry meant he was going to be repairing their equipment along with Imoen while the storm raged, including that full plate armor, which they had set aside the day before. "Understood. And the fact that the three of us are generally speaking the calmest of the group is probably a good idea considering what Imoen and Viconia ran into earlier today."

Harry grimaced at that, while Alora and several of the others laughed recalling the tale, although Viconia's hand on Harry's thigh had noticeably began to clench. She was almost in danger of her nails digging straight through his leather pants.

Taking Viconia's hand in one of his, he pulled it away from his thigh with difficulty and turned it around, letting his fingers move over her own palm, then up to her fingertips and back down as he answered. "I'm hoping that this storm will last long enough to wash away such memories. But if so, maybe have Khalid do the shopping? Especially if this harridan is still there, and thinks a half elf woman is just as bad as a full elf."

"If she does, I will do much worse than merely throw fruit at the woman," Jaheira sneered.

You have discovered another weak point. It turns out Viconia's skin is sensitive over the pulse point on her wrist. It isn't a big one like the one behind her ear you already found, but it is something to take note of.

Shaking that notification out of his line of sight, Harry continued to outline the plan going forward for the next few days. Edwin and Alora would join the rest of them to hunt down this bandit group, and then they would make a quick search for any tracks or signs of the wyvern that had killed the pilgrims. If they couldn't find any, they would return to town, link up with Jaheira and the others, and then as a full group go after the wyvern's. From there, Harry explained to Alora what Minsc and Imoen's roles in the party, and asked Alora if she would be comfortable with doing that job out in the woods, or if she was a city girl.

"Ooh, I like that phrase, city girl. It sounds really descriptive, but no, I'm no city girl. I was born in a small halfling village, and I've been exploring the world for a few years now. I won't say I'm very good, like Ranger good in the woods, she said, beaming at Boo on Minsc's shoulder rather than Minsc himself. "But I think I can hold my own."

"And you understand that a scout's job is to see what is there and report? Not get distracted by something shiny and give away her position?" Edwin drawled, making the words sound as if they were meant to be an insult, and yet, coming over concerned at the same time.

"Sure, that's easy. It's not as if I've ever been distracted by a particularly pretty flower, or a really cool bird or animal or anything like that," Alora said, waving her hand airily, not realizing that in doing so, she had made not only Edwin but everyone else there somewhat concerned about the idea of using her as a forward scout. Still, it was only one way to see if it would truly work, and that was to do it.

The group lingered over the meal as the rain continued to pound outside, with Minsc getting up once to add another log to the fire, and then setting warming stones into the fire to use later that night in the bedrooms. It looked as if it was going to be an extremely cold autumn evening. But eventually the meal was over and it was time to head to bed, with those who needed them taking a heated stone and putting them into small pouches.

"With all the magic available in the world, you would think that they would be better and easier ways to warm a house or even a bed of a night rather than simply heating stones and a fire. Such an inelegant solution," Edwin mused, shaking his head sadly. "Perhaps some enchantments on the bed themselves?"

"I can tell you have one way of keeping warm up of a night," Viconia whispered into Harry's ear as the others began to clean away the table, and sleeping arrangements were being discussed. "But do not think me so eager to jump into your bed until you have fully earned that right, Harry of Candlekeep. But do dream of what delights you might eventually partake in. It will wind you up all the more. And I will see you in the morning."

Harry sat stock still for a moment as he watched Viconia get up and move around the others, heading upstairs already, disdaining to actually join the discussion as to what room should be the girls room, instead just making the decision for them all. *I think this will be another night where I'm glad I don't actually dream thanks to my AAS.*

True to Harry's words, when the massive autumn storm broke two days later, the group separated once more, with an eager Khalid leading the trio of himself Jaheira and Imoen out to the fisherman's Lake. Neither of the half elves even bothered to go with the rest of the band to check in with officer Vai. Being cooped up inside a single house, particularly with Imoen and Alora becoming the best of friends over that time, had worn on both, who very much preferred the quiet of the forest.

Viconia was much the same, but she had been able to retreat into the kitchen with Harry. Their flirtations had continued, up to and including more nuzzling, random kiss, and even a few licks. No actual lip to lip kisses though, to Harry's surprise. Viconia seemed willing to kiss him on his neck, shoulder or ear, but shied away from his mouth for now.

They also quickly discovered that Minsc's exercises would indeed work. At least four times a day over those two days, while Harry trained his footwork, hip and waistwork with Khalid to finish the quest he'd gotten from training with him before the Friendly Arm Inn, Viconia and Imoen worked with Minsc to build up their strength. Both of them were able to add a full point to their strength skills in those two days, although Harry was warned that these exercises would only work to bring up their Strength stat by five in total. Still, that was more than enough for both girls to be extremely happy.

What somewhat shocked everyone was not the fact that the half-elven couple and Viconia had not liked the closeness and loudness of their companions, but that one other had been able to put up with it. Edwin had continued to get along with Alora throughout this weather-induced confinement, something that astonished Dynaheir to the point where it actually showed.

She and Alora in turn did not seem to be getting along very well. Dynaheir thought the halfling girl was ridiculously naïve, and did not have nearly as strong enough understanding of right and wrong.

Or, as Harry put it, property ownership. Alora seemed to think that anything she was curious about automatically should belong to her for at least the amount of it to have time it took her to lose interest. Which Harry thought was funny, but also dangerous.

What was also dangerous was how much of a talker she was, but the only thing they could do there was have Edwin and Dynaheir work, separately, there was no way they would work together, on the enchanted item. Harry hoped it would work, but also made certain that Alora would not be allowed to head out and about Beregost on her own without someone able to rein her in for now.

While Imoen and the half-elves were having a break from everyone else in the interest of science, Harry and his group checked in with Vai.

The first mission they were on turned out to be a bit of a dud. The band of bandits that Vai had reports on turned out to only be four bandits, typical bandits rather than adventurers turned bandits like the group of three Harry and the others had dealt with before. It took them barely a

full morning to deal with the four of them, and discover that most of the bandits had fled the area before the storm hit and to return to town.

From there, Harry and his group worked with Minsc in the lead (and Boo in charge according to the ranger), trying to find out if the gnolls had more of a presence in the area than the group it already been dealt with. The number of ears Harry had brought back had earned them all another five hundred gold but had horrified Vai. It'd only been the storm that had stopped her from ordering the band out at that very moment, as even monsters would have had trouble moving in that kind of weather.

Luckily for the town, the group found the camp that the gnolls have been using before attacking Drizzt well north of the Fisherman's Lake and it seemed as if they had been moving south back to the gnoll fortress when they ran into the drow. There was room in that camp for more, but most of it didn't look as if it had been used, although Minsc wasn't as certain about that as he could have been thanks to the storm and the impact it had on the camp. But the number of bedrolls and primitive tents seemed to point to it anyway.

So reluctantly, Vai was willing to except the fact that the town had been saved from that threat, however accidentally it might have occurred.

On the way back, the group met up with Jaheira and the others as they too were heading back to town. Imoen pulled Harry aside as they went. "It worked! But only at five percent increments. You really do need to put in twenty hours to get a single wisdom point."

Harry on the other hand was philosophical, shrugging his shoulders. "It makes sense. Like Jaheira and Khalid have said, there's got to be limitations on stuff like that. If not, other people would have recognized it before this even without my Advanced Adventuring System. Do you want to keep it up?"

"Strength I think is more important for me and for Vicky, yeah, but wisdom is important too if I want to..."

That was as far Imoen got, before the head of Vicki's hammer bonked into her back lightly, and Imoen was forced to turn, finding Viconia glaring at her, hammer quickly rising to pummel for real. "What have I told you about that detestable nickname, Abalolth?"

Imoen yelped and dodged away as Viconia came after her growling imprecations, and Harry chuckled. "Huh, glad someone else is being called that these days."

The next day, Imoen was outvoted, and joined the rest of the party instead of going to Fisherman's Lake alone. Neither of the half elf couple had seen the message that fishing was working to slowly raise their wisdom stat, proving that the Curse of the Dread One was even able to stop them from raising their stats with Harry's Advanced Adventuring System involved. As they had feared that going in, neither were annoyed by it, and Jaheira quickly proved that

she could use her Druid craft to track the wyvern that they were after even better than Minsc's Ranger skills.

Minsc often missed the damage done to the branches and trees above them, despite there being scant few remaining leaves around, whereas Jaheira didn't. Moreover, the trees actually spoke to her of what was going on in the forest in their own manner, something she explained as they pushed deeper into the Wood of Sharp Teeth with their scouts still around them rather than pushing ahead since none of them would know what to look for.

"There seems to be a disturbance in the deeper woods, both here, and further north. I... I feel the touch of Druids, but they are far more belligerent than most, and their attitude has begun to shape the woods. These woods, these trees are responding to me, but not as willingly as normal, and the birds and animals have slowly begun to turn against interlopers."

"Shadow Druids do you think, Jaheira?" Khalid asked, frowning.

"Shadow Druids? What are they?" Viconia asked, a question that was on Harry, Imoen and Alora's mind as well, although the others seemed to recognize the term and did not like it.

"They are a cabal of Druids... or perhaps a movement is a better term. They are a movement among the druid circles who believe that human societies have for far too long damaged nature rather than working alongside it. And that it is time that nature rise up and fight back. Not just human society mind you, but all organized, so-called civilized societies. They even have problems with a few elven nations," Denver shook her head, a faint sneer on her face. "Fools. They do not understand that everything is part of the larger balance, not just nature versus civilization, but everything else. They look at what little portion of the big picture they can see and demand change, not realizing that in doing so, they will force a change they do not want, when their belligerence is responded to with equal ferocity."

He nodded, understanding what she was saying, knowing without asking that Jaheira's own beliefs were not in keeping with those of the shadow Druids to say the least. "Do you think these shadow Druids are close?"

"Close... no. The touch of them is faint here, their influence on the animals equally faint, but discernible. I would wager that the closest conclave of shadow Druids is at least five or perhaps even six days travel for normal people through the forest... and perhaps moving away? Or perhaps the Shadow Druids are but a few among other druids who are fighting them for influence. They will not come close to Beregost, not now. Not unless the people of Beregost perform some great evil, or what they perceive as such, on the forest or nature that the Shadow Druids can use to rally themselves and other, neutral druids into acting."

Jaheira paused for a moment, touching one of the trees as they passed by frowning thoughtfully. "The Shadow Druids are not the only ones having an impact on the woods here, not any more. They... I think the Shadow Druids moved themselves recently. But there might be something else as well, something... Darker. It is closer, but I cannot quite localize where..."

At that point, Harry saw two quest notifications pop up in front of his eyes.

Side quest (minor) revealed: Things That Go Bump in the Forest.

While you do not have enough information to fully understand there seems to be something wrong in the Larswood, the portion of the Wood of Sharp Teeth closest to Beregost. What that might be, you do not know yet either, but it might prove a danger to the town.

Investigate or ask the priest of Lathander for more information about what could be out there.

Rewards: 2000 Experience. Increased reputation with the Church of Lathander. Increased reputation with Chief Priest Kelddath.

Note: As This mission falls under your agreement with Kelddath, there is no monetary gain here barring what you find on the thieves. Instead, you will gain an improved relationship reputation with the guards and civilians of Beregost. This will aid in Bartering with the local merchants and will help combat any rumors attempting to link you to the drow sighting regardless of Vai and Kelddath keeping the facts a secret.

This one was followed by another, although this one was even more nebulous.

Side quest (medium) revealed: Shadow Under the Eaves.

Your party member Jaheira has used her druid senses within the Wood of Sharp Teeth, and has discovered the touch of other druids. Some of them appear to be members of the combative Shadow Druid sect. This sect is a real and present danger to normal peasants working near or within the woods as they are violent and anti-civilization. This means they could prove a threat to anyone who comes in contact with them, and eventually even towns like Beregost or Nashkel.

Investigate as you go whether or not that is the case and then deal with the threat one way or another.

Rewards: TBA.

You do not have enough information to even figure out what part of the **FREAKING VAST** Wood of Sharp Teeth the Shadow Druids are in, let alone what level of threat they are. Thus no Reward can be calculated currently.

This is a ongoing quest that will be updated as you discover more information, much like the *Iron Intake Issue*.

Blinking, Harry explained what he just seemed to Jaheira, who looked at him with a scowl now fully on her face, her whole body tensing. "I think we can set the issue of the Shadow Druids aside. As your quest notification says, we lack even enough general information to follow up on it. Conversely, the first quest must be followed up on. If there is something interfering with the

nature of the forest, we must get to the bottom of it. Especially if it is something that the church of Lathander has discovered and is against. That is never a good thing.”

“Didn’t even cross my mind not to, I was just hoping you would be able to tell me more information first,” Harry answered with a shrug, to which Jaheira smiled, her tense posture disappearing as she bestowed a warm smile on him, with Khalid nodding along beside her. “First things first though, first the wyverns, then back to see if the head priest has any information on this darkness you mentioned like my note says. I’m not going to lead us into any kind of fight blind if I can help it. Not again.”

Moments later however, everyone’s attention was brought back to the here and now with a thump as Harry announced that his map had just begun to tell them something new. “Three red dots ahead folks in the direction Jaheira is was leading us. Since we’re not in visual range I can’t tell anything about them, but there is three of them when there should’ve only been one. And there’s also a blue dot. I have no idea what it is, that color normally designates neutrals, like peasants or guards.”

All of the adventuring party looked at one another in confusion, then shrugged as they set aside that mystery for now, and moved into a Concave Line formation, with all of them armed with bows or the equivalent as the two wizards backed up the line.

This precaution served them very well a moment later as not one, but three wyverns to scream at a challenge at the adventurers, all three of them taking to the air and flying forwards through the foliage towards them. Two were noticeably smaller than the middle one, but they were all flying and all very dangerous, although only the two smaller ones seemed fast enough to dodge around the majority of the tree branches large or small. The big one didn’t bother to dodge the smaller ones, simply crashing through them, its mouth open in a scream.

You have added a new page to your bestiary: **Wyverns.**

Wyverns are large, winged reptiles with two back legs and wings where a dragon would have forelegs. They are also much smaller than dragons, and lack a breath attack, but their tails are wickedly sharp and barbed. While not quite prehensile, their tails are amazingly shifty, and they can move wickedly fast. Best advice: don’t get hit. wyvern’s habitually coned in family oriented packs.

Their sense of smell is such that any kind of hide in shadows skill will not work around them, something that is completely unlike the sentient dragons. Their skulls are extremely thick, so any strike against their heads is more than likely to simply break scales and draw blood then be crippling.

Strengths: While nowhere near as strong as even a young dragon’s scale, those of a wyvern can ward away most arrows, and they are slightly magically resistant. All magic or regular non-magical attacks against them have a minus one fourth penalty.

All wyvern's have a poisonous bite and a poison on the stinger in their tail. This poison inflicts - 2 Health per second until Cured.

Wyverns cannot be put to sleep or stunned. Wyverns are Immune to Entangle, Grease, Hold and web-like effects while in the air.

Weaknesses: They're not very intelligent, and they can be single-minded in pursuit of a single target went on the hunt. Are also extremely susceptible to any kind of damage, being something like the wings on a bat. Loud noises are said to disorient them.

Harry breathed a faint sigh of relief that all of this matched with what Jaheira and Khalid had told them to expect (besides there being three wyverns instead of one, anyway) and took a brief moment to wonder whether it was levels or simply age that would let a monster move from being a young monster to a normal monster before he began to bark out orders. Thankfully, all of them already were poised to fire, spread out in the Concave Line through the woods, and Jaheira joined her voice to his, the orders being heard by everyone there. "Aim for the wings! Put them on the ground, and keep the range open! Don't get bitten, and watch out for their tails!"

This was easier said than done. While Harry's throwing axe - a bundle of which he had grabbed from the blacksmith earlier that day for this fight at Jaheira's suggestion - scored a nasty hole in one of the wings of the main adult wyvern, his weapon was the only one that did enough damage to a wing to really discommode one of the wyverns. In this case, the oldest and largest one.

It shrieked in agony, but kept flying forward, closing the distance before crashing to the ground. Yet it did so under its own power and twisted around, bringing around its tail, a tail that was twice as long as the wyvern's body.

Adult Wyvern has used Poison Tail Crack.

A wyvern's equivalent of a Power Strike, this blow will not only break bones, but if the tip of the tail cuts skin, will give the target the poison debuff.

The last few feet of the tail was long enough to reach him, and Harry hastily ducked behind a tree. A tree that exploded under the impact of the strike, the tail following him. Half of the tree's side shattered under the strike, sending this in pieces of wood flying as if it was so much shrapnel. One nearly took Harry in the eye, bouncing off the side of his helmet, while another hit his forearm and bounced off the gauntlet there.

Elsewhere along the line, everyone else's arrows or thrown sling stones also punched through their targeted wyverns' wings, causing the animals to shriek with anger and pain. But they didn't any real damage. Certainly the six or more holes punched into their wings didn't knock either of the smaller wyvern's out of the air.

Imoen saw this, and instantly knew that their arrows and everything else wouldn't do enough damage to put the wyvern's on the ground. Even Dynaheir and Edwin's first spells, magic missiles from both, weren't doing enough damage. While that spell homed in on the enemy, Magic Missiles could not target a single limb or wing, instead simply hitting the creature with magic missiles across its entire body.

But Imoen had an idea, and, making certain Alora couldn't see her from where she was stationed at the far end of the line, she used a modified banishing spell to launch several large pieces of the tree that Harry was now rapidly vacating towards the nearest younger wyvern. Even as the penalty to her health hit, Imoen saw the shrapnel blast through the smaller wyvern's wing, causing several fist sized holes. This was enough to make the wing, about as wide as Imoen was tall, useless, and the wyvern crashed through several tree branches before crashing into the ground.

Unlike its mother or older sibling, who was screeching fury and smashing through the trees towards Harry who was rapidly backing away, the smaller wyvern hit the ground in an ungainly heap. It screeched in pain and fury for a few seconds before pushing itself upright on its back legs. Blood raining down its right side, it too darted after Harry, ignoring Imoen and the others.

"Single minded, right!" Harry yelled as he dodged a blow from the tale of the mother again by ducking underneath it and letting it crash into a tree behind him. A second later though, he was smacked in the chest by the head of the smaller wyvern, impacting his chest as if it was a battering ram, hurling him to the side and closer to its mother. His armor held, though, and he only took a few points of damage.

A Color Spray spell from Dynaheir struck out, doing no real damage and not knocking the adult wyvern out as it should have, but that spell also had a visual component. The blinding lights of it caused the creature just shriek and pull back for a second, letting Harry push to his feet, and re-equip his newest weapon before it charged once more, nearly blind still. The Bec De Corbin's shaft was not only longer than his sword, but when the creature charged forwards, the spike on the end of it punctured straight through its neck, driven through it's scales by the monster's own furious energy.

Smacked almost to the side, Harry nearly stumbled, but was able to duck back and treated from the two wyverns as they and their fellow kept taking fire from the rest of his party. The concave line's formation bonus working to offset the wyvern's durability. The last crashed to the ground a second later when Edwin hit one of it's wings with an Acid Arrows spell. The wing membrane proved to be just as susceptible to acid damage as most other things were, and it fell out of the sky onto its side to join its fellows.

"Now!" Harry shouted, as the mother wyvern screeched and pulled back from its latest wound from his Bec De Corbin. He turned, racing away as Jaheira began to cast Tangling Vines. All three of the wyverns were caught in its grip, and Harry whooped. "Yes!"

After that, Harry and his party stayed at range, hammering them with as many long-range attacks as they could. They still weren't doing a lot of damage, but concerned about the wyvern's poison, Harry kept the party backing away whenever the wyverns broke free of the Clinging vines to charge them again. At one point, Jaheira had to renew the tangling vines assault, keeping the three monsters contained.

At that point, both of the younger wyverns panicked, turning and fleeing and still needing to fight through the vines, opening their bodies up further to arrows and spells. Dynaheir was quick to follow up on Edwin's earlier success with an acid spell. Within a few moments, the two younger wyvern were both dead, acid having eaten into their sides and softer rear ends to do enough damage.

But the larger one continued to try and close, shrieking and tugging her way through the tangling vines with brute force. But Harry wasn't interested in some kind of fair fight with the beast. Instead, he kept the group backing away rapidly through the trees, using his map to make certain there were no other monsters or other enemies about as they did, and eventually, the monster finally began to weaken under continued arrow, axe, Magic Missile and Fire Arrow strikes.

Finally, the last strike hammered into and through an area where its scales had already been burned off, and the monster's stomach burst, and it collapsed. The large wyvern twitched for several minutes, with Minsc and Khalid aiming for areas where the scales had already been scoured away until it stopped twitching and its red dot disappeared from Harry's map.

Harry ordered a cease fire, and moved forward, laying his hand gently on the head of the massive monster, whereupon he saw a pop-up appear, one that read much like the version he had seen when harvesting ears.

You have moved to harvest the resource, wyvern head. There are two other such heads available on your map. Would you like to harvest them all and place them in your Complex Item Box?

Yes/no

"This might be disturbing ladies and gentlemen; I suggest you all look away."

"Wait, huh? What are you doing? Does this have something to do with your advanced adventuring system, you didn't mention anything about being able to harvest things fasterRR!" His voice ended in a yelp as all three of the wyvern's were torn off of their bodies accompanied by a loud tearing noise that made the previous example of the gnoll years seem tame in comparison.

"Ugh, that's so gross! But kind of cool," Alora said, looking a little green, but not turning away.

Everyone else had heard Harry's words and had decided to follow them save for Viconia, who now nodded judiciously as she stared at the wyverns, eyes alight with interest. "Fascinating.

That could perhaps be most interesting, and most disturbing at the same time. I wonder, I wonder if that can involve further. We must see what you can do when you use it on herbs, spices or what-have-you, Harry.” Viconia shook herself, and turned away rapidly, making a turnaround motion with one finger to Alora. “But that was the easy part, I assume.”

Harry nodded, and grimly laid his hand back down on the dead wyvern. Everyone else turned away and even Harry closed his eyes for a moment as the scales of the monsters were torn off of them in an instant. Suddenly he was very, very grateful that this was a resource gathering thing, rather than attack. He wasn’t certain if he could actually watch that kind of thing happen in real time without losing his breakfast.

However, soon all three of the wyvern’s had been skinned, and placed in Harry’s Complex item box. Their remains were laid out bare of scale now, and after a few moments, Harry put that into his Complex Item Box too. The meat was edible and could be sold, although not for as much as the bones, fangs or claws, let alone the poison sack.

Each ‘resource’ required a new use of the combination skill, but thankfully none of the others were as nasty as the scales. It still took a few minutes, but that was nothing to the several hours it would have taken to do as complete a job with dagger and specialized tools. And Alora’s questions about the AAS kept Harry and the others answering them, pulling their minds away from the activity in front of them.

Once he was done, Harry move forward along the route the battle had gone, towards where the blue dot still remained, the others forming up around him as he did. “Are you sure the blue dot was in that hole they were trying to get into Harry?”

“Yep,” Harry said with a sigh, shaking his head at Imoen’s question. “I don’t suppose there are things like fairies or something around here, are there?”

“Doubtful, fairies are exceedingly rare, and no wyvern would be able to trap one in a hole if that is what you are thinking,” Jaheira said shaking her head, while Viconia and Edwin both looked a little dyspeptic at the mention of fairies.

“Ooh, but what if the fairy was already injured, or if it’s some kind of intelligent cat or something? A cat could fit in there, right? Oh, I’m so excited! I wonder what it is.”

Before anyone could stop her, Alora raced ahead of the others, kneeling down in front of the hole. Harry was about to pull her back via a spell, when a voice intoned from the hole, barely understandable thanks to how far away they were. “My thanks for my deliverance, friends! Unfortunately, I still find myself in quite a bit of distress. I do not suppose that you could extend still further charity to me?”

“Oh wow! I’ve never seen one of those before. Well, except for pranks when I was younger, but I’d always figure out where the voice was really coming from in the end. But here, there’s no

other place for it to come from!" With that, Alora, to the stunned surprise of everyone else, reached inside the hole, and pulled out what indeed looked like a chicken.

"Someone transfigured into a chicken? That is a most horrible fate, although considering that he is still able to talk, the transfiguration must have been done by someone either on accident, or with not sufficient enough power to transfigure the being's brain into its appropriate form," Dynaheir said, frowning thoughtfully.

Harry shook his head, remembering that like back in his own world, human-to-creature transfiguration was a thing. And now that the chicken was being held out in front of him out in the open, his Greater Observation could tell a great deal more than the simple blue dot on his map pad.

Name: Mellicamp

Gender: male? It is uncertain if Mellicamp will turn out to having been a male or female.

Race: currently a chicken.

Mellicamp is the victim, either through self-harm, or targeted, of a botched transfiguration spell. As Dynaheir had already pointed out, normally when a being is transferred into say a sheep, or a chicken (yes, there are specific spells like that, you've read about them in Candlekeep) they are unable to communicate, and the transfiguration does not last more than an hour. As you had been taught back in Hogwarts, a person or item's natural form as a certain amount of momentum that can only be ignored for so long.

However, judging by Mellicamp's words, this transformation might have been somehow made permanent.

"My name is Mellicamp, and I will thank you for setting me down! Despite my current form, I am still a wizard, apprenticed to the great and powerful Thalantyr the Conjurer! I will be treated with respect!" The chicken shouted, a male voice of possibly middle-age or less coming from it.

"Yes, but being apprenticed to someone great in no way makes you great," Viconia whispered into Harry's ear.

This caused Harry to smirk and lean in, whispering in turn, "I have often found the smallest of men bark the loudest."

Viconia snickered a bit, her shoulder bumping against Harry's very lightly. Harry's own arm twitched, and he fought an urge to hug her around the waist. While they had flirted extensively over the past few days, none of that had been in public, and he knew Viconia would not feel comfortable with that, or really with such 'soft' interactions as a simple sideways hug. *She's made it clear that she is attracted to me, but that isn't the same thing as wanting to be in a full*

relationship. I know that intellectually, especially after that discussion I had with Imoen, but it's hard sometimes to separate our physical flirting from our emotional friendship.

Meanwhile, Alora was concentrating on the chicken along with the rest of the party.

"Oh, it's now trying to be intimidating, that so cute!" Alora said. "Can we keep him? We could make him our mascot."

Mellicamp sputtered, but Minsc spoke up, shaking his head firmly. "The party already has a mascot in the miniature giant space hamster that is Boo. We do not need a talking chicken to accompany us."

"For more reasons than I could possibly count," Edwin drawled, shaking his head. "Besides, who knows where it's been, Alora? You might wish to put it down before you possibly catch something. Chickens are not the cleanest of animals after all."

Alora thought about it for second, then quickly set the chicken down, backed away, and pulled out a flask of water to start cleaning your hands. Like all the others in Harry's Adventuring Party, she had gained access to and control over an Item Box. "Good point. I'm a village girl, I should have remembered that! Especially when they been frightened like this one was, ugh."

"I would like to see how he would be after being chased by three animals large enough to eat you in a single bite without the need to chew!" Mellicamp stated angrily at the insult, his beak clacking between each word.

"How exactly did this happen?" Jaheira demanded tartly, crossing her arms and staring down at the chicken with a censorious expression on her face. "And how did you get so far away from civilization at all? We're a good half a day's travel from the nearest sign of civilization."

The chicken didn't meet her eyes, but he replied with some semblance of the truth. Harry could tell he was lying, but not about which part exactly. "I was out here on an errand for my master and ran into, well, a **lot** of skeletons. Too many for me to fight. I retreated, but when all hope of my getting away seemed lost, I tried to change myself into a form they would leave alone. It worked, but I could not change back, nor did the spell dissipate after an hour. That was several days ago, and it has yet to run its course."

"Or perhaps you have always had the soul of a chicken?" Imoen quipped, causing laughter around the group, although Jaheira and Harry did not partake of the laughter, instead glancing at one another, wondering if the mention of a lot of skeletons (which admittedly could mean as few as five or a whole lot more) had anything to do with the feeling of unnaturalness that Jaheira had been feeling from the woods earlier.

The chicken also did not seem to find it very funny, and waved its wings at her, actually now cawing like a chicken, or rather, a rooster attempting to scare away another rooster between

every few words. "I would like to see what you would *CAW* do if surrounded by undead! With no chance to *CAW* escape at all. And even your most powerful spells *CAW* not doing enough damage to the horde! I would wager that a thief like yourself *CAW* would find yourself overcome easily without the power of magic."

The rooster settled down a bit, its head shifting around in a chicken version of a shrug. "Now if you good folks could perhaps help me back to town, Kelddath, the head priest at the temple of Lathander in Beregost should be adequate enough to turn me back into my normal human shape. And if you are fast enough about it, I can talk my master into giving you some measure of recompense for your troubles."

Side quest (minor): Unnatural Chickendom.

The mage in training, Mellicamp, has asked for your help to basically solve the problem of his own making. While you are still unclear about why he is out here in the woods, it is very clear that this mage caused his own issue. He is a bit of a blowhard, but it is perhaps somewhat impressive that he has retained all his mental functions. such as they were, after so long transfiguring into a chicken.

Return him to Kelddath in order to change him back into a human and go from there.

Reward: unknown.

Warning: Mellicamp wishes to seem as if he can speak for his master. But judging by the fact that he didn't answer you truthfully as to why he was so far away from civilization, or where a mage in training (and thus low level) would come up with a spell powerful enough to transfigure him for so long, it is doubtful that is in fact the case. Thus your reward cannot be calculated.

Harry swiped that away, looking down at the chicken thoughtfully. "Alora, hold onto the chicken for now." Alora instantly began to whine at that, complaining about getting dirty again, but Harry simply smirked, stating that she had already picked the chicken up once anyway. "And while we're on the way, tell me more about these skeletons..."

End Chapter

This didn't cover nearly as many of the side quests as I had hoped. But it did push the romance aspect forward, and show on a small scale how that's going to work with Harry's various *ahem* skills. That and Alora's introduction to the group.

I don't want to get too bogged down, but I do want a few things to happen by the time they leave Beregost:

another round of level ups for Imoen and the other low-level members of the party, Imoen and Viconia's strength being upgraded, and Imoen getting far enough along back to her old self to know how much further she needs to go before accessing her Metamorph powers.

the ankheg armor. And a general equipment level up too. Including meeting Thalantyr, and a... certain item already in their possession... there is a reason why I have Imoen looking into enchanting items at present...

On top of that, Harry will start to experiment more with his new skill, and with Blood Magic before they move on. I figure winter will be a great time to do that. So you will see a few instances of 'several days later' as autumn and winter moves on. After they leave Beregost, there won't be another 'training/small quest segment' for a while, not until they are in Baldur's Gate. They will still complete small quests, but only as they come across them. They won't go out of their way.

For those wondering, the Patron Only poll results will be up soon. This took me most of the day, unfortunately. That and my family's attempt at a hotpot gave me the runs. LOL.