

# Untitled D&D Group Story

By BreaktheBar

Sponsored by Andrew and Trav

## Chapter 14

“Hi, Shane!” Tori and Elyse both chimed as they came in through the front door. They both had their knapsacks, and Elyse was carrying a 24-pack of Corona while Tori was carrying a bottle of rum.

“This is to say thank you for putting up with us,” Tori said with a dazzling smile as she handed you the bottle. Her teeth were a perfect white, her smile a perfect mix of playful and sweet, and she was wearing a crop top over a pair of plain grey sweatpants with slip-on sandals on her feet. Her dark hair was pulled back into a messy bun with sunglasses perched above her forehead, and she looked all for all the world like the gorgeous college coed she was.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the bottle. It wasn’t exactly top-shelf stuff, but it wasn’t in a plastic container either. “You ladies didn’t need to do that.”

“Yes, we did,” Elyse said as she came in. Despite her thin form, she was sporting a nice little set of lean arm muscles as she carried the case of beer. Her hair was down, mostly hiding the undercut, and she was wearing a thick-shouldered tank top and a pair of jean shorts that looked like they’d been crafted out of what had once been a pair of tight jeans, the ends of the legs left with a rough fringe. “You’re putting up with us on a Wednesday afternoon when you could be doing anything else. Like work. Or socialising with more interesting people.”

“OK, hand that over,” I said, setting the bottle of rum down on the little table where I set my keys when I came in the door and taking the box from her. “And to be clear - there are very few other things I’d rather be doing than running a game for you ladies. I love running a good game, and the way last week went I think we’re going to tell a really cool story and that you ladies are wonderful.”

“Awe,” Elyse said with a grin, turning to Tori. “He likes us, he really likes us!”

Tori snorted and chuckled, rolling her eyes at her roommate's antics. “Thanks, Shane,” she said.

“Come on, I’ll show you ladies where your booze will live,” I said. “Then you can go get changed. Rhia is already back there.” I led them into the garage and loaded the case into the beer fridge there, only to turn around and notice that Elyse was looking at my car and Tori was looking at my bike that was hanging up on its wall hook.

“You cycle?” Tori asked, blushing a little when she noticed I’d caught her minorly snooping.

“A couple of times a week - I should probably get out more than I do,” I said. “I’ve never been a runner, but healthy body, healthy mind.”

“I used to when I was in high school,” Tori said with a smile. “I biked all over my home town since I couldn’t get a car. I don’t trust leaving a bike outside our apartment building, and we don’t have enough space for me to store a bike in our place.”

“I said we could make room,” Elyse said, a little exasperation in her voice, then looking at you. “Two years running now, the weather gets better and she’s mooning all over people with bikes and I tell her we can make it work and she says, ‘No, no, it’s fine.’”

“Shut up,” Tori scoffed a little, rolling her eyes even as she smiled.

“What about you, Elyse?” I asked. “You looked like you were ready to lick the bumper of my jeep.”

“Maybe I was,” Elyse laughed. “This is a 2018 Wrangler, right?”

I raised my eyebrows. “How could you tell?”

“That was the year they introduced the 4th gen of the model,” Elyse said, turning and running her hand along the ridge of the hood. “All the new bells and whistles, same Jeep fun. Did you buy it new?”

“Used,” I said, shaking my head. “A couple of years ago, but I’ve always liked Jeeps.”

“Do you take the doors off for the summer?” she asked, turning and looking at me hopefully.

“I do,” I chuckled. “Though I don’t go mudding. Maybe I’ll take you ladies for a ride out to grab an ice cream or something after you beat the first boss fight of the campaign.”

“Oooh,” Elyse said with a big grin.

“Top down, doors off?” Tori chuckled. “That sound you’re hearing is Elyse’s panties hitting the floor.”

“Tori!” Elyse said, slapping her roommate's arms as she blushed.

“Ignore her, Elyse,” I chuckled. “My panties drop at that thought too.”

Both ladies started laughing, and you all headed back into the house just as Rhia was coming down the hallway looking for you. Her costume from the previous game had changed slightly - she was wearing the strappy sandals, the leather vambraces and the skirt of 'chainmail' made from soda can tabs, but the corset she'd worn before that had pushed her considerable bust up into a shelf was gone, replaced by a smaller waist-only corset the same colour as the vambraces and what looked like a loose crop top that had gotten the same soda can tab treatment as the skirt. The fabric gorget was still there along with the iron circlet keeping her hair out of her face.

"There you guys are," Rhia said.

"Nice costume change," Tori said.

"Thanks," she replied. "I realised that my armour is supposed to be all chainmail right now, so I'm going to hold off on making a breastplate. And don't worry, Shane. I already put a towel on my chair seat and hung one over the back."

"Ah, yes, young Padawan," I said. "Learn fast, the art of not scratching my furniture, you do."

All three of the girls snorted and rolled their eyes at me, but gave little smiles as well.

Elyse and Tori rushed off to get changed into their costumes, and I followed Rhia back towards the game room.

"So," she said as we both sat down in our seats, the promised towel coverings in place.

"Disappointed I'm not wearing the corset? I know it was a little... provocative, even if I didn't catch you staring last week."

"The better you feel your costume fits your character, the happier I'll be with it," I said. "But it was a pretty stunning addition, I'll give you that."

Rhia grinned cheekily at me. "Maybe my next character will be a rogue or something. It could probably pass for leather armour."

"Have some more faith in your gameplay," I said. "You won't die. Probably."

"Not what I meant, Shane," she said.

"I know, Rhiannon," I teased her back.

It didn't take long at all for Tori and Elyse to come back to the game room, both in costume. Tori's hadn't changed from the previous week, but Elyse had started making the changes to her robe that she'd planned. The black silk robe had dark blue and purple stitching in swirling designs along the bottom half.

“It’s not done,” Elyse said, doing a turn for all three of you to show off the work so far. “I’m trying to decide if I should do, like, a snake motif on the top part or something else. Maybe spooky clouds and a crescent moon.”

Rhia and Tori both gave her some ideas, but I was busy trying not to cough. When Elyse had done her turn and then pivoted at the waist, gesturing to some of the embroidery work, I’d very nearly gotten flashed through the open armhole of the robe. It had definitely not been designed to have the arms take off, and Elyse’s mesh elbow-length gloves didn’t add any protection.

There was no nip slip, however, and Elyse took her seat and all three of the gorgeous, costumed ladies turned to me expectantly.

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s get started.”

## Chapter 15

The ladies wanted vengeance. For the town, but especially for Pretty the Tree - they really had made it almost too easy for me to set them up, naming a tree and letting me get away with giving it a cute child-like voice.

We still had a little bookkeeping to do, however.

“First things first,” I said. “Let’s talk about your level up. Rhia, what did you pick up?”

“Olivia got more health, obviously,” she said. “And I got access to my Paladin spells, and more importantly my Smite ability.”

“Cool,” I nodded. “I’m excited to see what you come up with for how it looks when you do that. I also need to know what you, Rhia, dream about doing with your degree when you graduate, and one long-term goal Olivia has if she survives her adventures in Tremulous Crook.”

“Oh,” Rhia said and blew out a breath. “Um, I want to be an actress. Probably TV, not movies, but I’m not sure. And Olivia wants to... She wants to build a temple to Revelry.”

“What would that look like?” Tori asked. “A medieval dance club?”

“Maybe,” Olivia laughed. “I’ll have to come up with something. Maybe it’s an entire fairground or a banquet hall. She’s from Parnassus, which is the biggest city in the world, so I’m sure there’s plenty of different kinds of things she could do.”

I knew that, if it were someone in my regular group, the likely answer would have been ‘a brothel, obviously.’ Thankfully, even if Rhia was hoping for some sexual shenanigans in the game, she wasn’t so single-minded in having a dirty mind. “That’s a good goal for Olivia, I think,” I said. “But now I’m a little concerned that I’m going to lose you to Hollywood eventually.”

“Oh, definitely not,” Rhia said. “I’m more likely to go to New York than Hollywood, but even that I’m not sure of. I’d way prefer to get onto a TV show that shoots somewhere that *isn’t* in the entertainment hubs.”

“Still,” I said, playing up my wistfulness. “The baby bird flies from the nest.”

Rhia stuck her tongue out at me, making the other two chuckle.

“What about you, Tori?” I asked, turning to the Indian girl. “What did you get levelling up, what’s your goal, and what’s Jade’s?”

“Well, I got access to my Ki,” Tori said. “So I can use that to do a flurry of blows and attack again on my turn, or to defend myself. And I also got more health. For my goal, I’ve always known I

want to be an on-air news anchor. I'm doing a minor in Journalism, and I'm hoping I can get a job for a local station when we graduate - I'll try and do freelance stringer work first if I can't get in right away, maybe shooting a guerilla documentary or something. And doing local theatre on the side."

I had been expecting Tori to be heading to Hollywood, if not New York or overseas to London. With her looks and personality, unless she froze up under pressure or something, I couldn't see her getting cast in *something* within a couple of years. The News was definitely a pivot from that, but I could also see it.

"Interesting path," I nodded encouragingly. "And it sounds like a lot of fun to pursue while you're young and full of the energy needed to make it work. What about Jade?"

"Jade doesn't really have plans, I don't think," Tori said, thinking for a moment. "She doesn't want to go back to her roving family on the Plains, so maybe she wants to rebel by settling down somewhere. Maybe she'll be the bouncer for Olivia Bar-Temple."

"You're hired," Olivia grinned. "The pay is shit, the hours are awful, but you can drink all you want and there aren't any rules about not sleeping with the guests."

"Hah!" Tori barked a laughed.

"How about you, Elyse?" I asked, turning to the blonde. "How was getting levelled up?"

"Easy, and hard," Elyse said. "Tori helped, so I got more health too, and I got my Sorcery Points so I can get an extra spell per day right now. But it was hard to pick what spell I wanted!"

"That's being a sorcerer," I said, nodding. "On the one hand, you feel like every spell choice matters. On the other, you aren't constantly overloaded with trying to decide which spells to prepare for any niche situation you might run into. Want to tell me which spell you picked?"

"Can I keep it a secret until it comes up?" she asked. She really did look exotic, with her pretty tomboy features plus the addition of the costume jewellery and elf ear prosthetics, and the hopeful look in her eyes was a killer.

"Sure," I said. "I love surprises."

"Cool," she said with a grin.

"What about plans?" I asked.

"Um, well, I kind of want to get into the film industry too, but on the crew side. I'd probably start with either camera work or lighting work. Eventually, I'd want to be a DP or AD," Elyse said. It was an interesting career choice - being a director of photography on a film or show was a big

task since you were basically in charge of the *look* of everything, and an assistant director did a *lot* of managing. “As for Renee, I think she wants to eventually retire to a little magically hidden cottage in the woods to raise shadow-cats, but before she does that she wants to find out the secret of her sorcerous blood and the shadows that she controls.”

“Very cool,” I said. “And depending on what you ladies do, that could be very possible. Keep your ears out for when you might have a chance to talk to someone or do some research.”

“Cool,” Elyse said.

“Anything else you ladies want to go over before we start? Any questions?”

“What’s the most powerful magic item within five miles of the town?” Rhia asked with a smirk.

“Well, the most powerful magic you’re aware of is the more of friendship,” I replied with an equal smirk.

“Booo,” Tori laughed. “We want fat loot.”

## Chapter 16

After a quick recounting of the first session, we jumped into the game with the three adventurers heading straight for Headswoman Pelli's home where they had stayed two nights prior. They found the Headswoman there having a meeting with two of the other elders of the town, a pair of old grandmothers who represented other families that had sent two generations of men off to the war against the Dark Tyrant in the east.

It didn't take long for the girls to get the jist of what had happened. The afternoon after they had left the day before, a large group of the roughians who had been frequenting the town Inn had come into town and been asking questions about eight travellers on the road matching the girls' description. The roughians claimed their innocent friends, a group of hunters, had been viciously attacked near the King's Way and they were looking for the 'vile bitches.' No one in town believed them, based on their dress and the thuggish way they acted and demanded things, but that didn't mean secrets were kept. One or more people in town had spilled the beans about the girls' visit, and what had been seen.

"Eight?" Elyse asked in confusion. "Did someone else come through town?"

"Nought but you and them," Pelli said with a shrug.

"Musta been someone spinnin' tales," Grandmother Florence said. She was the oldest of the three women and smacked her lips in disgust after she spoke.

"Pelli said you killed some 'o them sumbitches out in the woods," Grandmother Yellowdove added. She was a halfling woman, so her age didn't show quite as heavily on her since her folk kept their youthful appearance for much longer. "Any chance one or two got away?"

"A crossbowman," Olivia grimaced. "Almost took my head off, and shot Jade in the ass, then disappeared into the forest."

"It was my thigh," Jade sighed in exasperation.

"Well, that's the fibber then," Grandmother Yellowdove said with a nod. "Went back and had to tell 'is friends why 'is other friends was dead, and made up a story about there bein' more 'o you so they didn't sound like the coward they is."

"Men," Renee said with a sigh and a roll of her eyes. Then Elyse giggled and flashed me a grin.

The bandits, or roughians, or whoever they were had occupied the tavern for the night, and everything had been tense until, late in the evening, a piercing animal howl had cut through the countryside. The girls all looked at each other upon hearing that, connecting it to their fight with the big magical wolf and its death howl. The boss of the roughians had gotten enraged when he heard it, and he ordered the firing of the Inn and pulling down of the Chun-Shi Tree since it was



a local landmark that the girls had been seen admiring. Then he'd broken into the Town Hall and destroyed every piece of furniture with his own hands and found the lockbox with the small amount of taxes that Pelli collected to have ready for the actual tax collectors who would come out in the name of the Duke.

In the morning the roughians had left the town. Pelli and the Grandmothers felt a little thankful that no one had gotten kidnapped or something, but the destruction of the Inn and the ruin of the Town Hall were severe economic blows to the town. The loss of the 'big apple tree' was a cultural loss - they didn't know anything about the legend of Chun-Shi, but every wedding in the village for generations had been conducted under the boughs of that tree.

After a brief discussion, the girls convinced Pelli to call a meeting of Town Elders so that they could make their pitch to hunt down the bandits as the official sheriffs of the town.

They stayed with Pelli again in her home that night, and Olivia asked questions about the other Elders they hadn't met and found out that three older men on the council of seven were likely to cause the most problems; two of them were patriarchs of the largest farming families and had been appeasing the bandits for a couple of years, and the third was the local Hedge Priest, an elderly dwarf who claimed to have been part of the founding of the village. The Dwarf also happened to worship Grace, a deity whose followers were often known for turning the other cheek and forgiving others rather than seeking vengeance - often to their own detriment. Those three could swing very well swing the seventh member of the Elders, the devil-born Elf Margaretta. She was apparently a hermit, and a bit of a witch, who had come to the village several human generations ago and gone through a turbulent time due to her fiendish features, bearing curled horns sprouting from her brow and permanent scorch marks on her fingers as markers of the pact that some ancestor of hers made with a creature of the Hells.

Armed with that information, the next morning they attended the Elder meeting in the cleared-out Town Hall. The girls had a plan, however, and split up before the meeting when they saw that one of the farming family heads was running late. Renee stayed outside, waiting to socially ambush him, while Olivia and Jade went to work inside on the dwarf and the farmer there.

I decided to take it easy on them and let the girls separate the two so that they could each make their own attempts to sway the men ahead of time rather than give them one roll for both. Tori and Rhia apparently had different approaches planned, so that ended up being a good thing.

Jade ended up talking with the farmer and Grandmother Yellowdove, recounting the fight with the wolves and the size of the pelt they got off the donkey-sized one. She was clearly working the angle of reminding the farmer of the dangers his family, and the others like them, were facing on the farms where they were isolated. I gave her the option of rolling diplomacy or intimidation to see if she'd made her case but she wasn't trained in either of the skills so they were the same. She decided on diplomacy since it was the more positive of the two, but she

only rolled a ten total. The farmer Elder was impressed by the story but thought she was telling a big fish story and stretching the truth a bit.

Olivia, on the other hand, approached the Egglestein the Dwarf. He was so elderly that his beard and the sparse amount of hair on his head was a soft, silky white and the crags in his face looked like they'd been eroded there by centuries of rainwater. As soon as Olivia started to try flirting with him I made a snap decision just to mess with her - Egglestein was not only elderly, but he was also hard of hearing and so gay that he couldn't pick up on flirtation from her even if he tried.

Egglestein's clueless responses to Olivia's opening flirtations, voiced in my favourite 'old man' raspy accent, got some guffaws out of Elyse and Tori, and Rhia asked to roll insight on Egglestein. She got an 18 overall, so I revealed that old Eggy was completely clueless about her flirtations due to his combination of age and sexuality. That got Rhia throwing her hands up in the air and grumbling good-naturedly.

"What about the elf-devil lady?" Elyse suggested. "You could try flirting with her. Shane, you said she was in the room too, right?"

I had actually been surprised they weren't *more* interested in Margareta after I described her, but then I was working off of assumptions from my usual game - everyone in The Game knew that a devil-touched individual came from a sexual union between a mortal and a devil, and their descendants often reflected their fiendish parentage in more than just some visual cues. That was one detail that Rhia must never have picked up on from getting the stories out of Mel and Dan.

"She is," I said. "She's been speaking with Grandmother Florence off to one side. You're pretty sure Florence is trying to get her on your side, but based on basic body language you can tell Margareta is being a little standoffish."

"OK, I'm going to thank Egglestein for his time in considering the matter we're meeting about," Rhia said. "And then I'm going to head over there and put the moves on Margareta. Maybe she'll be more receptive."

"Alright, since this was Elyse's idea, I've got an idea," I said, and quickly wrote out some notes about Margareta on a sheet of paper and tore it out of my notebook, handing it over to Elyse. She looked at it, raised her eyebrows and glanced at me, then smirked and nodded.

"Olivia," I said, turning back to Rhia. "You approach Margareta. She primarily looks like an Elf, with a slender body and a natural grace, but the signs of age just starting to play around the corners of her eyes and mouth. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a single thick braid, and the horns on her head sprout from her brow and run horizontally across the front and then curl back over her pointed ears. You also notice that she wears a thin pair of gloves beyond her otherwise

normal villager garb.” I gestured to Elyse, who stood up and put on a ‘minding my own business’ act.

“Wait, Elyse is playing Maragretta?” Tori asked.

“For this scene,” I said.

“Huh,” Tori said, clearly surprised. I knew it was a different tact than most DMs would follow, but I liked giving my players things to do and Elyse seemed game to follow my directions. I’d given her a couple of personality notes about Margareta, and a secret about Margareta that would fuel her responses - namely that Margareta was the guardian of an ancient shrine to her fiendish ancestor out in the forest, and wants to keep anyone and everyone away from it in case of it corrupting people.

“Well, if we’re acting it out,” Olivia said and stood up so that she could approach ‘Margareta.’ “Hello,” she said, putting on a warm smile. “I’m Olivia. We haven’t been introduced, but I think you’re Margareta?” The girls had forgotten I’d said that Margareta was talking with Grandmother Florence, but that was fine since they were getting into the roleplay.

“Oh, yes,” Elyse said, affecting a light and airy voice for the character, and offering her hand in a dainty, aristocratic way. “Your reputation precedes you, Olivia.”

“As does yours,” Olivia said, taking Margareta’s hand and raising it up to her lips, giving it a slight kiss on the back of the fingers as she bowed slightly. “I’m so glad that a woman such as yourself, with your insight and knowledge, is here to help with the decisions to be made.”

“Well, when needs must,” Margareta said with a little sigh.

“I have to admit,” Olivia said. “I’m surprised to find a woman of such striking beauty and youthfulness as part of an elder council. I love your eyes.”

“Well, thank you,” Maragretta said. “You have very beautiful eyes as well. Human eyes are such windows into the soul.”

“Tell me, Margareta,” Olivia said with a smile, casually looping her arm through the elf’s as they stood next to each other. “How much do you know about what’s going on out in the woods?”

Margareta didn’t know much - she lived about a mile outside of the village near a spot famous for being ‘cursed.’ The fact that she’d started the rumours that it was cursed several human generations ago was part of her secret. Elyse took some liberties in describing her home, turning it more into what sounded like an old Southern Plantation Estate sort of building than the small hut I’d originally thought it would be, but that was fine.

Eventually, Olivia and Margaretta were starting to flirt a little more directly, and Olivia said, "I wouldn't mind coming around to your hidden manor, maybe get a tour? The view from your bedroom overlooking the pond sounds quite delicious."

"Alright, I think we need a diplomacy check," I said, interrupting before Elyse could answer. "Let's see how receptive Margaretta is to a forward move like that."

Rhia went back to her spot and quickly rolled, consulting her sheet for the skill bonus. "Nineteen," she said. "That's got to be good enough."

I scribbled out a few more notes for Elyse and handed them over to her, giving her a chance to read them as she smirked, grinned and nodded before handing them back. She pulled Elyse back over to resume their scene.

"I think a tour of the grounds would be a good way to get to know each other," Margaretta said, a playful light in her eyes. "The pond is good for more than looking at though. It's so relaxing to strip down and float in its cool waters, and I have all the privacy I can ask for."

"Are you suggesting that we go skinny dipping, Margaretta?" Olivia asked with a playful raise of one eyebrow.

"I might be," Margaretta answered and then winked.

"Awesome job, ladies," I said. "Olivia has definitely made a positive impact on Margaretta."

"That was fun," Elyse beamed as she and Rhia separated, getting back to their seats.

"It was fun to watch," Tori nodded. "You did really well just improving a character too, Elyse. You should consider going for a stage role for Fall Performance."

"Nah," Elyse said. "It's different just playing a game here and doing something on stage."

"That was fun," Rhia said, echoing Elyse but looking at me. She met my eye and I knew that she knew I'd made the opportunity to act more, and flirt, happen and she was thankful for it.

Renee still had her scene to do outside the town hall, but it didn't take too long. She was intending to intimidate the late Elder, and after a brief scene where Elyse got to play up the spooky side of her shadow magic, she rolled a fifteen on an intimidate check. The farmer patriarch wasn't left pissing himself, but he was definitely a little shaken by Renee's mystical powers.

The meeting itself didn't take too long after that either; the girls apologised to the Elders for what had happened to their village, and their unintentional part in it happening. Then they pitched their desire to help clean out the bandit problem and hunt down the Gang that had attacked the

village - they just needed the Village's blessing to do so as their Sheriff and deputies. They already had Pelli and the Grandmothers on their side, and Margareta quickly agreed as well. The farmer that Renee had spooked voted positive as well, giving furtive looks over at the sorcerer as she smirked back. That only left Egglestein and the farmer that Jade had failed to convince voting against. The farmer changed his vote in the name of trying to make it a unanimous decision, but Egglestein refused - "Forgiveness is the universal truth," the old Dwarf said. "I cannot cast a vote for the violent end of any sentient being, no matter what they have done."

With the vote over and their course of action decided, Headwoman Pelli a pin in the shape of a heater shield with a small sword etched into it. After a quick discussion, the girls decided Olivia should be the Sheriff, since she was a member of an order of Knights already, while Renee and Jade would be her deputies.

"And that," I said. "Brings us to a quick washroom break."

"And booze break!" Olivia said. "Those beers have to be cold by now. Can we use glasses from the kitchen?"

"Absolutely," I said. "Go ahead."

All three of the costumed coeds got up, heading for the garage and the beer fridge, leaving me shaking my head. Watching Rhia figure out how to flirt in character with Elyse had been fun and funny, but it had also been a little sexy. Both of them were attractive girls, and once they'd gotten the rhythm it had been... maybe not *arousing*, but definitely arousing adjacent. And based on their choices, it might just keep getting steamier from there.

I blew out a breath, still trying to mentally grapple with what *might* happen, and then shook my head again. All I could do was focus on the game in front of me.

## Chapter 17

Each of the girls had a beer in front of them, Elyse chugging half of hers and sighing in satisfaction before the game started again.

There was a bit of checking to see if they needed to buy or borrow anything from town - none of the ladies had a proper ranged weapon like a bow or crossbow, and they had to decide whether they would be taking Phil and Seymor the donkeys and hiring on Fergus again. In the end, since they'd purchased the donkeys, they were running pretty low on funds and couldn't afford a crossbow. They did, however, make sure that Fergus was OK to take care of Phil and Seymour while they were gone and he treated the pelts to get them ready for sale.

"You better keep 'em safe, you big lug," Jade said. "And yourself. If the Gang comes back before we do, don't go getting yourself in trouble."

"Yes'm, Miss Jade," Fergus mumbled, nodding his head to her.

Renee passed him a silver coin when she shook his hand goodbye, mentioning that Phil in particular deserved a treat after they'd used him for bait.

Then it was Olivia's turn. "Fergus, you were a good guide for us," she said. "And I'm worried about what comes next. Would you allow me to give you the Blessing of Revelry?"

"I don't right now what'm that'd mean, Miss Olivia," Fergus said.

Rhia stood up, motioning for me to stand and come around to her side of the game table. I raised an eyebrow and stood, joining her.

"Fergus is a little taller than you, right?" Rhia asked.

"About," I said. "And maybe a little broader."

"OK, so this is what Olivia does," Rhia said.

Olivia took Fergus's left hand and brought it to her chest, placing it over her heart, and she did the same with hers to him. Then she looked Fergus in the eye. "May your water taste like the finest wine," she said, adding a gravitas to her voice. "Your laughter boom loud and bright, and your nights be filled with companionship. I bless you in the name of Revelry, who loves all that bring joy to others' lives." Olivia then reached up with her right hand, scooping it behind Fergus's neck and pulling him down so she could kiss him on the forehead, and then planted a kiss on his lips. "There," she said as she let go of him with a smirk. "You're blessed."

"Um, uh," Fergus stammered a little, lifting a couple of fingers to his lips as he processed what had just happened. "Thankee kindly, Miss Olivia."

“Is that a homebrew blessing mechanic or something you have in the game?” Tori asked me as I went back to my seat. Getting kissed by Olivia again had been strange just like the first time, but a little more comfortable. There hadn’t been any tongue or anything, it had just been a firm kiss, and I was sure she’d done that sort of kiss for different acting scenes in class or performances just like I had when I was in college.

It was still kissing Olivia though.

“No,” I said. “That was definitely all Rhia.”

“I just wanted something that made sense, and I wasn’t about to do the sign of the cross or something,” Rhia smirked as she sat back down in her chair after making sure the towels were in place protecting the chair.

“Well, I thought it looked good,” Elyse said. “And it was believable.”

“Oh, I did too,” Tori said. “I just wondered if she was actually blessing Fergus or not.”

“Mmm, well, mechanically not that you know of,” I said. “But *he* definitely feels blessed.”

That got some chuckles from the girls, and we got back to the adventure. They left town in the direction the bandit gang had departed town and got a mile out of town before they realised none of them had a good idea of where the hell they were going. Jade was the only one trained in the Survival skill, which was what they would need to use to try and track the path of the bandits since they weren’t following a road or obvious trail, but she had focused her stats on Dexterity and Constitution so she only had a small bonus. After a couple of poor rolls, leading to a couple of hours wandering around the wilderness, it was Renee who said, “Why don’t we just go get Fergus? He’s a tracker, he’s *got* to be good at this stuff.”

So they tramped back into town, went to Fergus’s place and hired him on again. He got his sister in town to take care of Phil and Seymour, since taking the donkeys into the forest seemed like a bad idea without any roads, and he passed off the pelts to another trapper to get them properly treated and prepared.

They set off again, this time a little after noon, and I rolled for Fergus to do his tracking and they were off.

Instead of rolling on the random encounter tables myself, I had the girls roll for me, each one representing a portion of their travelling day, but they each rolled pretty mediocre and they didn’t run into any strange things or wild animals. They set camp for the night, Fergus the only one who had brought a tent, and the girls teased him about sharing it with them even if it would be a tight squeeze. They let him be however, Rhia rightly deciding it was too early to jump *that* far into the ‘roleplay’ activity.

The next day they were up bright and early and on the path again. Tori rolled low in the morning and they stumbled on a trio of angry wild boars; there were some bad scratches to Olivia and Jade once the beasts were dealt with, and Fergus bemoaned not being able to properly harvest the plentiful meat on their bones - three adult boars could have fed most of the village for a night and it was a waste to leave them behind. They were on a mission, however, and the girls gave him time to harvest enough from the pigs that they could cook that night on the campfire.

Unfortunately, their afternoon rolls weren't much better. The raw meat being carried attracted a cockatrice - a carrion lizard-bird creature that wouldn't have been *too* deadly except that it had the ability to petrify a person with its poisonous bite. Fergus almost succumbed early in the fight, only saved by Renee leaping into action and doing the 'suck out the venom' trick with a really good Medicine roll even though she wasn't trained in it. That delayed the effect for enough time that Olivia was able to use her Lay on Hands ability on Fergus.

Rhia stood up from her seat for that, putting both hands on my chest and leaning down to look me in the eyes deeply. "I heal you in the name of the Great Party," she said and then slapped both hands on my chest. I coughed in response, playing up that Fergus was coming out of the paralyzing effect.

That wasn't the end of their troubles, though, because late in the day just as they were looking for a place to camp, Renee stumbled on a patch of strange mushrooms. Now, if I'd been playing The Game with my regular group, the mushrooms probably would have been hallucinogenic aphrodisiacs. Or phallus-shaped things that let out spores that made people horny. Or some equally silly reason for a sex break from the fighting. The girls definitely weren't there yet though, so the mushrooms ended up being alive and hostile - tiny versions of the Myconids from the official settings. Renee tried talking to them and got pebbles thrown at her in response, followed by toothpick-sized 'spears' as they gabbered in their strange language.

It was cute until it wasn't, and Renee felt a sharp pain in her ankle. When she looked down she saw two of the little creatures trying to cut her Achilles tendon with little stone axes like they were preparing to fell a tree. That finally turned things into a quick combat - the mushrooms didn't really have a chance, but it was the kind of encounter that if the girls had just left them behind I would have brought them back bigger and more dangerous in the future.

I still could, considering they probably hadn't been able to kill *all* the mushrooms.

Nothing happened overnight during camping, and they set out the next day. No encounters in the morning, and Fergus called a halt to their trek at about mid-afternoon. They were a good two days' travel into the wilds, and despite the fights had been rolling well to make good time so were hopeful they might have even been catching up to the bandits.

"What's wrong?" Jade asked Fergus as he crouched low.



“Somethin’ up ahead,” Fergus muttered. “Somethin’ strange. People.”

“Might be the bandits,” Olivia said.

“I’ll go take a peek,” Fergus said quietly. It had been proven during some of the rolls in the forest that he was fairly stealthy. Jade had a chance of keeping up with him, but Renee and especially Olivia not so much.

He left and came back a minute later, shaking his head.

“Well?” the girls asked.

“It’s strange,” Fergus reported. “It’s like a whole village sprung up in the middle ‘o the woods. Looks like shite, but lots o’ rough lookin’ folks walkin’ around.”

“How many is lots?” Jade asked.

“Maybe fifty, what I saw outside,” he replied.

“Shit,” all three girls said at once.

“What’s strangest is Gal Palach is ‘bout three, maybe four days that way,” he said, nodding to the west. “Can’t see Duke Unger lettin’ an army o’ bandits gather up out ‘ere if anyone knows ‘bout it.”

Olivia blew out a long breath, looking at her friends. “Alright,” she said. “We want vengeance for Pretty and the town, but there might be even more important stuff going on here.”

“Are you suggesting that we need to infiltrate a bandit camp to figure out what their plans are?” Jade asked.

“With only four of us, and fifty-plus of them?” Renne chipped in.

“It’s long odds,” Olivia agreed. “But for the realm, I think we need to.”

“I’m in,” Renee nodded.

“Me too,” Jade agreed.

All three girls looked to Fergus.

“Er...” he said. Part of me wanted to have him scam and head back to Tremulous Crook - one less NPC for me to be tracking. On the other hand, the girls had started to care about him more and more, which made him a good point of leverage to ramp tension. There was also the fun of

making him the 'damsel in distress' in the future, turning the trope on its head. "Foine," he said. "But I ain't killin' nobody. Or raidin' a town or nothin'."

The girls all grinned and started to come up with a plan.

## Chapter 18

What the girls came up with was fairly simple - they were going to pose as mercenaries. They already looked a little ragtag, so with the addition of some liberally applied dirt and dust to their clothes they could pass for even more road-weary than they were. Renee, as the least mercenary-looking of the group, would be the magical leader while Olivia, Jade and Fergus were her bodyguards. They considered putting on the tin howling wolf amulets that they'd taken from the dead bandits on the King's Way but decided it would be bad if someone from that group saw them and knew they weren't part of the gang.

Olivia also thankfully remembered to hide away her Sheriff's Shield pin.

Once they were ready to go, Rhia had Elyse, Tori and I stand up to the side of the table and hold hands. She cleared her throat and smirked at us, then put on a serious 'Olivia face.'

"We're risking our lives here," Olivia said. "If they find out we're not who we say we are, horrible things could happen not only to us, but to the village, and to the realm. That's an army down there. An army of thieves, murderers and cowards. We need to find out who their leader is, and what they want. If we can find the bastards who attacked Tremulous Crook and pulled down Pretty, we might need to try and just remember their names or faces. The first priority is finding out what's going on and getting out of there alive. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Renee said.

"Hell yeah," Jade nodded.

"Yarp," Fergus agreed.

"Good. Then there's just one thing I want to do," Olivia said. Then she turned to Renee and put a hand on her chest over her heart. "I bless you in the name of Revelry, who protects those that party with good intent." Renee, after a moment, put a hand on Olivia's chest over her chainmail as well and they shared a meaningful look. Then Olivia pulled her in and kissed her forehead, and then her lips firmly for a good three seconds.

When Elyse pulled away from Rhia she was blushing just a little and licked her lower lip.

Olivia turned to Jade, who stepped a little closer and mimicked Olivia's motions as they felt each other's hearts. "I bless you in the name of Revelry," Olivia intoned. "Who strikes down those who commit the most heinous party fouls."

Jade grinned, and leaned forward a little for Olivia to kiss her forehead, then tilted her chin up to accept the firm kiss.

Lastly, Olivia turned to Fergus, who mimicked the ritual motion as well. “Fergus,” Olivia said with a soft smile. “I bless you in the name of Revelry, who sees the work of party hosts and rewards them.” She pulled Fergus down to kiss his forehead again, and then his lips.

I was a little surprised when I felt Olivia’s tongue tease my lips for a split second. It wasn’t even long enough for me to decide whether to deepen the kiss or not. The fact that her words had also felt more for me than they had for Fergus was also hovering in my mind.

When we separated, we all stood there for a moment before Elyse chuckled. “Now I get why there was a Satanic Panic way back when,” she said. “Roleplaying rituals is fun!”

“Acting certain things out definitely heightens the gameplay, as long as you’re with the right group,” I said, heading back to my chair. “But I *think* this is probably a good place to end the session.”

“Wait, no,” Rhia said. “Things were just about to get tense!”

“Yeah,” Tori said. “You can’t cockblock us like that.”

“Ladies,” I chuckled. “We’ve been playing for over four hours. It’s dinner time.”

“Well, what if we order pizza?” Elyse suggested. “Could we keep playing then? I don’t have anything else going on tonight.”

“Me either,” Olivia said and turned to me. “Please, Shane? Can we keep going?”

“We promise to order the toppings you like,” Tori added.

I was suddenly faced with three gorgeous college coeds each giving me the sad puppy dog eyes routine. Rhia was definitely the best at it, but Tori wasn’t far off and Elyse wasn’t a slouch. I sighed and checked my watch again, then pulled out my phone. Only three emails were waiting for me.

“Alright,” I said. “You ladies order pizza, *good* pizza, and we can keep going.”

“Yay!” all three of them cheered, and then I was getting hugs from each of them in turn. The pizza was quickly ordered from one of the local mom-and-pop shops in town that we knew was quality, and then I acquiesced to them each having another beer with their meals. I went to the kitchen while they chatted and put together a small veggie platter to go along with pizza. As I was coming back from the kitchen I hesitated in the hall when I heard what the girls were talking about.

“Have you ever kissed him before, though?” Elyse was asking quietly.

“Not before today,” Rhia whispered back. “I dunno, it’s not a big deal, right? It’s like doing it on stage or in rehearsal. It’s playing the role.”

“Well, I gotta find a way for my role to kiss an NPC now,” Tori joked quietly, making the other two chuckle quietly.

“I dunno, that was a pretty good kiss, Rhia,” Elyse said. “Maybe I need to find a reason for us to make out.”

More giggles, and I decided that things were headed in a good direction for Rhia’s plan, so I went in and interrupted before things turned too jokey between them. The girls all gravitated to the munchies immediately - they were supposed to be bringing the snacks themselves, but so far that hadn’t happened. I’d probably need to remind them before next week.

We settled back around the table and I described their approach to the camp. It was a ramshackle collection of tents and lean-tos built around what looked like the ruins of an ancient fort. Only two of the actual structures remained and were covered in moss and ivy, while most of the stone had either collapsed over time or been carted off to build something else, somewhere else, in a time long ago. The smaller, temporary structures seemed to be clustered together in groups, hinting that there may be divisions between the various people who had gathered, and as they approached they saw a variety of different species represented. A trio of dark-skinned dwarfs, bare of face and sporting large black mohawks, eyed them warily as they passed by. Then they were hissed at by Lizardfolk with lean muscles and a bright blue and orange colouration to their scales.

I had the girls roll a group Performance check to see how well they pretended to bandits; Elyse and Tori rolled well, while Rhia’s roll was on the low end of medium - that felt like it fit, considering Olivia was a member of a Knightly Order so she would probably be the least likely person to be seen with this sort of group. Thankfully for them, it was more successes than failures.

Once they were deep into the camp, realising there were probably double, if not triple, the original guess of how many people were among the tents and buildings, I had them roll perception checks. Renee rolled the lowest, so I gave her the information that the larger groups seemed to be camped closer to the centre and the two ancient stone structures covered in ivy. Jade was next, with a good bonus but slightly lower roll on the die, and her keen eyes noticed several of the roughians near the smaller of the two stone structures were wearing medallions around their neck proudly. They were the same colour tin as the ones they had looted, but she would need to get closer to double check they were actually the same stamp as well.

Lastly, with a natural nineteen on the die, Olivia spotted a much more specific issue. A man, dressed in rough leather and smudged with dirt, was looking at them like he’d seen a ghost. And he had a large crossbow slung across his back and had a tin medallion hanging out of his shirt.

“Fuck,” Olivia grunted.

“Get him,” Jade said, low and threatening. “Before he can warn anyone else.”

“I’ve got this,” Renee said confidently. Shooting the other two ladies a look, she strode forward as if she were going to pass right by the man as she headed towards the larger of the stone buildings, but at the last minute she veered to the side and the purple sigils on her scalp flared slightly as she cast a spell.

“Alright,” I said. “What are you casting?”

“Charm Person,” Elyse said with a grin. “I wasn’t sure what I’d need it for, but I figured being able to turn someone into a temporary friend *had* to be useful at some point.”

“Nice,” I chuckled. Charm Person, and Charm Monster, had been used a lot over the years in The Game for both innocent and dirty purposes. Not to mention the Hold spells. “And it’s always a good pick. You just need to remember that when the spell wears off the person *will* know that they’ve been magically charmed.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be a problem this time,” Tori said with a smirk.

“And remember that the person you cast it on gets to try and resist it,” I said. “What’s the Spell Save DC at the top of your character sheet, Elyse?”

It wasn’t high, since they were 2nd level, but the bandit didn’t exactly have a good Wisdom save either. I rolled behind my DM screen, dragging it out just a little to tease the ladies. “You cast your spell,” I said. “Since you got so close to him your magic words and hand motion don’t draw any extra attention to you, thankfully.”

“Shit, I didn’t even consider that,” Rhia murmured, looking relieved that they hadn’t just pulled the entire camp down on themselves.

“What do you say to the man, Renee?” I asked.

“So it worked?” Elyse asked.

“Well, he isn’t fleeing from you, but you’re not entirely sure. Once a spell leaves your mind you only have the physical clues to know if it did what it was supposed to.”

Elyse nodded and blew out her breath, then straightened her posture a little as she assumed her Renee roll again. “Hello, little friend,” she said.

“Um... Uh...” the bandit stammered. “Hello.”

"You recognize me?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Good," Renee said. "You and I, we have a connection. By blood and combat. Here and now, that makes us friends, doesn't it?"

"I... I guess so," he said.

"Lovely," Renee said, circling around him as she looked him up and down like a drill sergeant examining a new recruit. Then she slipped her arm through his. "Come," she said. "You're going to give me a little tour. You owe me that much before I meet with your leader."

It was a smart play - it was also leaning a little heavy on the Charm effect since the person was just supposed to see her as a 'friendly acquaintance,' but I wasn't going to quibble. Instead, I justified it in my head that the guy was scared of her and her friends, just like he would be of any bandit war leader or his own boss, so doing what he was told came naturally to the coward.

The move also netted the girls some extra information, though the Bandit (they never asked his name) couldn't give them the 'big plan' that was being worked on.

He was part of the Risen Wolf Gang, who weren't the largest or the wealthiest of the various cutthroats and bandits that had gathered for the 'big meeting' that was supposed to happen, but the meeting had been called by their boss and was happening on their land. The other three largest groups were the Tentacles, a large bandit group from much further north who were led by a woman that could control plants and use them like, well, tentacles; the Red Bronson Family, a collection of nearly two dozen men and women all named Red Bronson and identifiable by their fiery orange hair; and the Burnt Men, a group of nearly twenty soldiers who had abandoned the war in the west. Supposedly they escaped the army unscathed because they were presumed dead in the magical explosion that killed the rest of their regiment of 100 pikemen. The other smaller groups were various bandit groups, mercenaries and other criminals that had been interested in hearing what Alexander Houndfang, the leader of the Risen Wolf Gang, had to say. And his promise of wealth.

They got the tour, staying away from the major gatherings and just getting a look at the different groups, along with the history of the place as far as the Bandit knew it. The place was said to be the site of some sort of ancient Orc Fort that had been torn down and rebuilt by Men when they drove the Orcs out of the area. At some point, the man guessed during the Dragonstorm, the place had been destroyed and forgotten. A history check from Renee gave her enough insight to know that the place must have been destroyed well before the Dragonstorm and didn't show the right signs of damage that would have come from a concentrated destructive effort by a dragon. The site itself had been used for years, if not decades, as a place for bandits and other outlaws to gather for meetings, but this was the largest that had ever been organised before as far as he knew.

The Risen Wolf Gang was occupying the smaller of the two stone buildings, using it as their barracks. The larger of the buildings, meanwhile, was being used as a disjointed Tavern Hall where the various groups were able to drink, mingle and trade.

The Charm spell lasted for an hour, but they'd only used about twenty minutes of that on the tour, so they had the Bandit bring them close to the Red Bronson part of the camp. He'd explained earlier that the Red Bronsons had been in competition with the Risen Wolf Gang for a few years, and there had been open conflict between the two groups several times.

"Anything else I should try to get out of him?" Elyse asked the others.

"Does the Risen Wolf Gang have a second-in-command?" Tori suggested.

Renee asked, and the bandit nodded. "His name is Jack Empire. He's Parnassian and has six death marks on him from the City Cartels, which is why he's out here. Only reason he's Second is because he's the second most deadly man in the group next to Houndsfang. We all know they'll fight eventually, but my bet is Houndsfang'll kill him easy enough. There ain't no hurting Houndsfang when he gets going."

"Must be a Barbarian or something," Rhia murmured to herself.

"Well, my friend, you've definitely done well in trying to make amends for what you did on the King's Way," Renee said. "But, to be frank, I think you're more trouble than you're worth. Jade?"

They weren't completely hidden, but they'd wandered between Red Bronson camp and one of the smaller groups and with Olivia and Fergus blocking one direction and Renee standing in the other they were decently out of view. Jade stepped up behind the man and punched him in the throat, intending to break her trachea.

I asked for the attack roll, noting that there would be a penalty since they were trying to do this quietly and with a called shot to the throat. Tori rubbed her d20 between her hands nervously, then looked at Rhia. "I hope that blessing really does work," she said, before releasing the die to roll on the tabletop before coming to a stop. She stood up to look at it, and so did Rhia and Elyse.

"Holy- Natural Twenty!" Tori crowed.

"Yes!" Rhia cheered.

"Awesome!" Elyse grinned.

Tori, smirking widely, laughed as she looked at Rhia. "I guess the kiss really *did* give a blessing. Nice! I'll need you to give me a smooch before auditions in the fall."



That got some laughs out of all of us, and I briefly described the death of the crossbow sniper as he suffocated and couldn't call out for help. They left him there between the tents to be found hopefully much later.

They made their way back out into a main thoroughfare in the big camp and huddled close together.

"So we know who is here, but not why," Olivia said quietly. "What are we thinking?"

"Well," Tori said. "We either try to join one of the groups, or we keep pretending to be our own group. We can try hitting up the tavern, see if we can get any information there."

The girls agreed with the plan to go get drinks, and just as I was about to describe their approach to the big stone building the doorbell rang.

It didn't take long for the pizza to get paid for, and I acquiesced that the girls could have another beer with the meal so new ones were fetched out. We paused a little while longer to all finish our first slices before we got back into playing.

"You approach the big stone building. Its walls are made of blocks that look like they belong in a castle wall, and they are worn round and smooth with time. Ivy covers about two-thirds of the structure, and while you can't see them you know there must be a couple of holes in the roof because two thin streams of smoke are rising from fires lit inside. There are two men stationed at the door, big and burly. One is wearing a Risen Wolf Gang medallion, while the other has the bucket helmet of a soldier of the King's Army. They eye you as you approach, the soldier in particular leering more than considering how dangerous you might be, but neither says anything as you walk through."

Elyse snorted. "Even in fantasy settings, bouncers have big heads."

I sighed apologetically and continued. "Inside is one massive room, with a ramshackle collection of tables, chairs, stumps and rocks arranged into the semblance of tavern seating. The very middle of the room, however, is open in a sort of circular sand pit, with a fire blazing on either side of it to give off lots of light. Two men are currently fighting in the circle. There's also a bar at the far end of the room, big barrels of ale stood up and being managed by a group of women."

"Ale?" Olivia asked the others.

"Ale," they all agreed, even Fergus. Or maybe especially Fergus.

"As you move to head towards the bar," I said. "An odd-looking man with a burly physique and a long face with an even longer beard steps forward and interposes himself."

“Oi,” the man said, his voice rough and gravelly. “I ain’t seen none o’ use here ‘afore. You new to the Meetin’ Grounds?”

“We are,” Renee said, filling her role as the leader in their cover story. “I-”

“I ain’t care ‘oo yous is,” the man interrupted her forcefully. “We only got two rules in at the Meetin’ Grounds. A first one is no fightin’ except in the pit.” He thumbed back towards the sand pit.

“What’s the second rule?” Olivia asked.

“Someone from every gang, party or group ‘as to fight in the Pit,” he said, eyeing each of them up. “So, ‘oo’s is gonna be steppin’ in fer a round with Big Red Bronson?” He gestured over to the left of the pit, where a big, muscled man was currently shirtless, glistening with sweat in the firelight. He had a shock of red hair on top of his head, a red pair of mutton chops, and he was grinning savagely as he watched the current fight going on while another Bronson was stitching up a cut on his cheek.