***Bhaal Son Remodel Chapter 1: Magic Goes Blort, or, Idle Hands Do The Devil’s Work***

There were only so many times a person could stare at a ceiling without going utterly barmy, Harry reflected, and he felt that he had finally reached that point. *Having gotten my own room is nice, but I wish they’d let me in my old cupboard now. At least the spiders in there were always weaving different webs and other such things for me to look at*.

The Dursleys had given him Dudley’s second room, though honestly the reasons for it escaped Harry. On the one hand they told Harry it was because they felt he was getting too large for his cupboard. On the other hand, he knew, because he’d overheard them, say it was because they were afraid of what other magicals might do if they discovered they were mistreating him.

*But if they were really trying to convince people they treated me good, then why the heck do they think they cold get away with locking me in here!? I mean, come on, they even installed a cat flap!* Harry groused, looking over at the item, before his lips quirked into a wry smile. *On the other hand, watching Fatso cut away at the door and then add that lock was actually kind of funny. All that flesh wobbling and the way his face turned so purple with the effort. Puce I think that color’s called?*

Sighing Harry shook his head and went back to contemplate the rest of the room. *Merlin, Morgana and Maeve but I am BORED!!!!*

When he had been forced to return to the Dursleys after his first year at Hogwarts, Harry had gone through a period where he had blamed himself for what had happened to Quirell when he was possessed by Voldemort and had subsequently been turned to ash by Harry’s touch thanks to the magical protections of his mother. But eventually his reading of comics that Dudley had tossed into this room, his second room, had helped him get over it.

Thinking about it, Harry did not really want to be a Batman, bloody amazing belt and super martial arts aside, who always tried to take in Joker despite whatever murder he’d just committed. Quirell had been trying to kill him, and Harry was no hero, willing to take that and just try to capture him in return whatever it cost him. No, while Harry regretted it, he wasn’t going to beat himself up over having finished Quirell off. He was only sad that Voldemort, his real arch-nemesis hadn’t been killed either.

That probably was not a very health way to think of it, but alone and, for the most part, locked within this room for more than a month now, it was the best Harry could do. He had reread every comic in here several times, then gone on to read the old tabletop game books from when Dudley had gone through a phase of thinking the little models were cool. Warhammer was bizarre to put it mildly, though Dudley had always liked the Space marines and Orcs. *Heh, for obvious reasons on that last one, why paint him green and let him grow a bit more he’d make perfect gobber.*

On the other hand, Magic the Gathering was actually kind of funny to read after his time in the magical world. *Although, how Dudley had been able to even have a Gathering book for a day without his parents going crazy is still a mystery.* Finding his mind going down the same old rutted road, Harry threw his Transfiguration textbook to the side, scowling angrily. Harry had gotten so bored he’d read all his textbooks again, back to front, and while educational, it was not something anyone but a Ravenclaw or Hermione could call fun.

“Right, that’s it Hedwig, time for desperate measures!” he said to his friend, who perched nearby. She precked back at him, before going back to ruffling her feathers. The snowy owl could get out of the one window the room had easily enough, but Harry couldn’t fit out of it himself thanks to a few bars barring his path while letting enough room for Hedwig to pass. That had actually been a concession Harry had convinced Vernon of. After all, Hedwig was a gift from Hagrid, and the half-giant might become angry enough to come back to discuss things with them if they didn’t let Hedwig out to hunt for enough food to live on.

Of course, the bars they had left were enough to keep Harry inside. *I don’t know what’s worse, my only being able to leave this blasted room* for chores, or none of my friends trying to contact me. “Are you certain you can’t get a message to them Hedwig? Ron and Hermione I mean. Although, you’d think that Hermione would try muggle mail after a month of us not hearing from one another. What if somethings wrong?”

“PREK,” Hedwig precked back at him, her tone emphatic before she twisted and looked away.

Harry had always been able to tell what Hedwig was trying to communicate at moments like this, and that didn’t fail him now. He reached forward, running a finger through her feathers. “I know girl, you can’t find them, but it’s just weird you know I wish I could figure out if the problem is on their end, or on ours with the wards Headmaster Dumbledore said was supposed to protect me from being found by Voldemort or his followers.”

Harry had questioned Dumbledore on that point, having asked about the possibility of living at Hogwarts year round, or even moving in with one of his friends. He hadn’t broached the subject with them, but he’d hoped that one of them might take him in, if he was willing to pay rent or something similar. But the headmaster had told him it was impossible. He had to go back to the Dursleys for his own safety. *Although I note the old man with the questionable taste in clothing didn’t say anything about my sanity or level of living.*

Hedwig nipped at his fingers, making her opinion about the matter plain, then flicking her nose towards the piles of junk in the far corner. Perhaps, her movements implied, Harry could find something in there to alleviate his life-threatening level of boredom.

“Well, it’s a possibility I suppose.” With that bit of encouragement, Harry began to work his way through the mounds of junk. The books and graphic novels had, by comparison been relatively well-treated, placed in neat piles by the door. But the rest of the refuse of years of Dudley breaking toys and being given new ones had been pushed to one side of the room to let room for Harry’s own books, not his wand or anything magic-looking, all of that remained in his confiscated trunk, and a tiny cot and blanket pressed into the far wall.

Now with his owl’s gentle remonstrance, Harry looked at that pile of junk not as actual junk, but as a target to alleviate his boredom. With that in mind, he began to sort through it, creating numerous smaller piles. Most of what he found was broken and useless, board games missing their pieces, dolls missing limbs, Legos of all shapes and sizes all mixed into a giant pile in the far back, figures that had broken off heads or some other body part, stuffed animals without much stuffing, a bike of all things missing a tire and chain. *Why in the world did Vernon and Petunia try to give Dudley a bike!? He’s more likely to try and eat it than ride it!*

But the best, or most surprising find was a nearly brand new computer. “What the… why do the Dursleys have one of those?” Harry didn’t know much about computers, but he knew they could be used to play games and other things, maybe even write. He’d never interact with one before this, the computer he’d gone to school to before Hogwarts had restricted access to its four computers, and they had been more to browse through the library than anything else.

He also found a few computer game discs and looked at the cover avidly. “Baldur’s Gate?” reading the description Harry became excited. This sounded like a lot of fun. “Now if I could get the computer to work…”

He found and hooked up the power cord, then, after some exploration, found the way to connect the small, bulky monitor to the equally clunky looking computer. The computer had a large dent in the side, and the cord barely fit into its little socket, but putting his ear to the side Harry could make out a faint hum, so he supposed that meant the thing was getting power. “Now let’s see…”

Pressing the power button, Harry listened intently but the hum didn’t get any louder and there didn’t seem to be any noises or anything else to say the computer was on. “Bugger.”

Harry thought about taking the thing apart to look inside, but he discarded that thought quickly. *After all, how the heck would I know what was broken and what not? I could spot anything loose, but that’s not the same thing as knowing where it would then go. I’d be playing it but ear, and while I guess I’m good at that, what if I make it worse?*

Then he remembered the first time he and Hermione had met on the Hogwarts and the spell she had used to repair his glasses. “Occulus Reparo, wasn’t it? If that’s the spell to repair glasses, then maybe if I do the same movements, if I can remember them, and remove the first word, it’ll work on anything?”

*I know we aren’t really allowed to fo spells over the summer, but I think that’s just because of the Statute of Secrets. So if I do it here, with no witnesses…* Harry shook his head then. “Ah, but wait, I’m missing a very important item here, my bloody wand!”

With something to concentrate on now, Harry was feeling a lot more energetic than he had been. He did try to take the computer apart to look inside, using a piece of another toy as a makeshift screwdriver. But as he had thought, he couldn’t actually figure out what all he was looking at once inside the thing. Still, at least the reason the monitor wasn’t working was obvious, the screen had been cracked, presumably by Dudley in his temper tantrum, just like the damage to the actual computer.

The next day, while Petunia was spying out her window on a neighbor who was apparently talking to the milkman too long (Harry had no idea what Petunia was imagining and most desperately did not want to) he snuck back into the house from the garden where he had been pulling weeds and stole the key to the cupboard, and then took his wand from his trunk. Instead of putting it in his pants or in his room, though, he carefully replaced it with a twig from the garden of similar size and then hid his wand behind the sink in the bathroom.

That night, when he was allowed to wash up after a full day out in the garden and making dinner for the Dursleys, he snuck it into his dirty clothing. As Harry feared, Vernon had, indeed checked on both the cupboard and his room when he came back, but didn’t find anything amiss. *I’m going to have to watch out for that.*

With his wand in hand however, Harry was hopeful that soon he’d have something to wile away the boredom with. That night, when the noises of the Dursleys snoring reverberated in its chorus throughout the house, Harry started to experiment. Waving the wand over the monitor, figuring that was the least complicated part, Harry intoned, “Reparo!”

Nothing happened, no flash of magic no nothing. Still keeping his voice low Harry tried another few moves with the wand, racking his brain to try and remember the movements he’d seen Hermione use. Still nothing happened, and he began to get a little angry, his hope for something, anything to do in his imprisonment after having his hope rise plummeting. Concentrating on the monitor, on the crack and what the monitor should look like he began to try to sort of thrust with his magic, forcing it out of the wand as he tried to almost impress the image into the reality. “Reparo!” he intoned, hissing the word almost.

This time it worked, and the monitor began to flash almost as he watched, the long crack healing itself in an instant. “Yes!” Harry pumped his arm in the air, whisper-shouting the word. Then, looking around fearfully he waited a few minutes to make certain he’d not been heard. Then he stared first at the monitor, then his wand in sudden, wild surmise. “There is no way that was the right movement Hedwig, but the spell still worked. If it’s not the movement, then how much magic is based upon the movement, the word, or the image!?”

Quickly he turned away and wrote those thoughts down, pausing only briefly. “Huh, this kind of makes me feel like Hermione after a particularly juicy piece of knowledge. Well whatever, it might be she’s got a point about, gah, studying more.” He paused at that thgouth, remembering what little he’d been told about his mother by his teachers, and frowned. “That… Mum was a good student. Maybe I really should try better. After all, there’s no way the Dusleys would be able to compare my tests to Dudleys and punish me for proving better than them now.”

With a newfound conviction, Harry turned back to the task at hand, gesturing again at the open side of the computer and this time trying at first to not use the verbal spell. It didn’t take, but he could feel something at the same time, like his magic was trying, but couldn’t quite work without the spoken word. “Huh, so, is this something I can practice with, get better at?”

With that in mind Harry moved over to the broken junk pile and took out a few of the more intact pieces, and began to practice. Eventually he did make a silent Raparo spell work on a Dudley’s Action Man action figure.

Once he was certain he had the spell working well enough, Harry turned back to the computer. Here though his magic’s ability to repair the damage was impeded by Harry’s not knowing exactly what it should look like. The spell repaired some things, a crack in one of the odd circuit things, made one other broken little red thing match another in size, and so forth. But when Harry tried again to turn the computer on, it still didn’t work: there was obviously something still wrong with it.

”Still that’s okay Hedwig,” Harry said to his avian friend. “Since even that failure’s told me something. It’s the image that matters with a spell like this. The word is harder to do away with than the wand movement, but you can do it!” Writing that down too, he smiled. “Well, computer or not, I’ve got something else to concentrate on now.”

From there, Harry practiced for about an hour, trying to use a few spells he had taken from his books. The ones he was most familiar with, Immobulous and Stupefy, a spell he’d taken to practicing every day at Hogwarts after his meeting with Quirell started to work after about another hour of study. This was big, this was so big it wasn’t even funny! *If Hermione and I are still friends after this summer and she learns about all I’ve found out she’s going to flip!*

However in his excitement Harry had forgotten one thing: the fact students weren’t supposed to be doing magic over the summer. It was a somewhat ridiculous rule, but it was in place, and, despite Harry figuring that no one would care if he did magic while alone in a locked room at night, he was being monitored all the same.

As Harry was ready to close his notebook for the day and turn in, there came a rapping noise on the window. Quickly racing over so as to not let any of the Dursleys hear, Harry found an unfamiliar owl waiting outside on the windowsill. Hedwig too locked over, and as Harry opened the window quietly, she precked irritably at the other owl, her large eyes locked on the other owl as if it had offended her.

The owl, a large tawny owl, looked away after a second and shifted uncomfortably, but stayed put enough for Harry to remove the note on it. “Um, as you can see, if I am supposed to reply Hedwig will take the message. Erm, thanks, I suppose. Am I supposed to pay…”

That was as far as Harry got before Hedwig precked harshly and flared her wings. The other owl instantly took off, not a second before Hedwig flew forward to land on the windowsill herself, her claws outstretched.

Chuckling at his friend’s territorial nature, Harry looked down at the large, gold and black envelope, marked with the name, and the phrase Department of Magical Law Enforcement. *Hmmm, wonder what this is about?*

Opening it, Harry read the contents, his brows furrowing in anger. *‘Dear Sir, we have detected the use of magic at your location. As this location is not in the magical world you are being issued a citation. Be warned that continued illegal use of magic will result in your wand being snapped and time in Azkaban. Wishing you a good day Mafilda Marchbanks, director Misuse of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement.’*

Harry slowly put the missive down, then bit his lip until it nearly bled as he stopped himself from cursing with the reminder that he was in enemy territory so to speak, and that there was no way he would let Vernon find him using his wand on him. After a few minutes of simply getting control of himself, Harry moved over to the window and looked past Hedwig, scowling. *Am I being watched somehow?*

But after a few minutes, Harry pulled back, looking around. *Fine, so I’m not being watched by a person, but a magical method of being watched.* At that point, Harry remembered the letters to him from last year.  *Ughhh I should have remembered that. So magic can tell someone, both at Hogwarts and in this DMLE. Think I remember Hagrid mentioning them, and the Ministry, called them all useless I think...*

For a moment the worry about being observed was all he could think of, but then a thought occurred to him. *But, wait, if even the teachers at Hogwarts know I was living under stairs, they must have some idea* about what my life is like, and the headmaster forced me back here. And it’s obvious the DMLE doesn’t care about my life, just so long as I don’t use magic. A dark smirk came to his eyes at that idea, and he tossed the missive into the pile of junk along the far wall. “Well in that case, I think I’m going to start my teenage rebellion a few years early. And if I can’t get away entirely, that computer, and the games I could play, become even more important. Still how to go about fixing it, if I can’t use magic here?”

That took him a few days to think a solution to, by the end of which Harry Potter was ready to go absolutely spare for boredom. His days were spent doing chores, then being bunged up back into his room with nothing new to do now that he couldn’t practice magic and had no new books or comics to see.

Finally however, he thought up a solution of sorts. After a morning of weeding and other garden work, he approached Petunia while she was watching some kind of TV show about women in London. “Aunt Petunia, um, can I speak to you for a second?” She glared up at him but since it was a commercial at the moment he hurried on. “It um, well, it occurred to me that, um, in the interest of keeping my sort from coming around, or sending mail to me, like they did last year, I should, um, go downtown and look for my kind’s equivalent of a mail box.”

Petunia sneered. “Hah! Speaking of mail, I note after saying you had made friends this past year at that freak school of yours that none of your so-called friends have deigned to try and contact you. What’s the matter Potter,” she made his last name a curse, “Your freakish friends not so friendly?”

“I, I think you might be right about that Aunt Petunia, but that doesn’t mean my own concerns about mail coming in by owl is wrong. Surely you don’t want the neighbors to notice that kind of thing?” He asked. Giving Petunia a minor win like that was best way with her. She would smile and go away happy with that victory. In many ways she was the easiest of the three Dursleys to deal with. Dudley would push and torment making fun of Harry at the drop if a hat while the older fat walrus would never listen he’d just smack Harry upside the head.

“Ugh, fine!” Petunia groused. “You won’t need to be driven anywhere would you? You’d have to pay for the gasoline used if so, prices are outrageous these days I swear!”

Harry bit back a retort at that along the lines of *Well if you didn’t waste so much on toys Dudders broke within a week maybe you’d not have to worry about that kind of thing.* Instead hejust shook his head. “No ma’am, I can make my way down well enough, I just wanted your permission to leave, and money for the bus, that should be cheaper than the gas right?” *And for you to not wonder where I am.*

The idea of using this excuse to get on the Dursleys good side had crossed his mind at one point, but he had rejected it. When it came to Harry, the Dursleys didn’t have a good side.

“Fine, but I’ll expect you to do all your chores for the day, and get back here in time to start dinner! I won’t have you shirking your chores, not when we’re good enough to put a roof over your head,” Petunia said, pointing out the backdoor. “Now get back to work!”

It was another few days of mindless, mind-numbing drudgery before Harry had finished enough work in the garden and the rest of the house to get an afternoon off. He walked down the street then took a public bus into London, where he walked around for a time until he found the Leaky Cauldron, the eyes of the people around him skirting over it automatically. Entering quickly he moved through the thankfully busy bar to the back alley, a hat pulled down to hide his scar.

With the knowledge that he was being watched, Harry figured that he couldn’t just entirely escape the Dursleys as he would like, nor could he keep using his magic there. He didn’t think they’d snap his wand like Hopkirk or whatever the name had been warned, but he also wasn’t willing to risk it. So the idea of repairing the computer and using the games within as an escape was really the only thing that interested him. This visit to Diagon Alley was to discover two things: one, if kids could get away with using magic in the magical world, and books, as many books on magical theory and repair charms as he could find.

With his hat on, Harry thankfully was able to move through the alley without being mobbed like he had that first time, thankfully. He first went to Gringotts, getting some gold from the goblins, near to the same amount he remembered having used to buy his books before school with Hagrid. From there, he went to the book store, but Harry found it wasn’t very helpful on repair charm.

In the bookstore Harry nearly had a heart attack, leaping back out of the way of a tall, dumpy-looking redhead, whose face reminded him far too much of the trio of Weasley boys, Ron, Fred and George. “Oh, sorry youngster, I say, that cap! Are you a muggle-born!?” the man said, sounding almost effusive now. “I don’t suppose you’d be able to explain what ekeltricity is, would you?”

“Erm, yes sir, I am, and sorry, no, we don’t start learning about electricity for another year.” Harry said, making certain quickly that the hat he had taken from the Dursleys was in place. “Um, I’m just looking for, um books on magical theory, and well, maybe repair? Er, one of my accidental magic moments broke me mum’s favorite vases.”

“Ah, well I’m afraid that is something the teacher who introduced the magical world should have seen too. Still, I suppose that it must have been a busy day for her or him. Unless, oh dear, you didn’t get Professor Snape did you?” Mr. Weasley asked solicitously.

“Erm, I got short, kind of bouncy elderly guy with a face like, um well like those goblins really.” Harry said, now truly out of his depth and just coming up with stuff on the fly, finding it far easier than it should have been really. “He only was there for a few minutes though, then me parents had to go to work, and he left.”

The man nodded. “Ah yes, these days they give muggleborns a single day near the end of August together, to meet and greet and walk the Alley together. I would wager he had a number of other muggleborns to get to. Pity, with your question about magical theory books you’d be a shoe in for Ravenclaw. Still, I can help you find the books at least. My names Mr. Weasley, I’ve got three boys going to Hogwarts already, and a young girl, the only one in the family, going this year. She’ll be your classmate then.”

“That sounds great, I’m an only kid meself,” Harry said, emphasizing a bit of what he’d heard Vernon call lower-caste accent. Lying about having parents was kind of painful, but this was still a way forward to get what he wanted here, and he’d do it. “I’m Connor, Connor Rooney. Pleased ta meetcha.”

Mr. Weasley shook his head with a grin then showed him where the books on magical theory was, then warned him jokingly, “Now, I don’t suppose you have a wand yet?” When Harry nee Connor shook his head, Mr. Weasley nodded. “Well good, once you get one, don’t try to experiment. The Obliviators will be no kinder to your family than they would be otherwise, remember that.” Mr. Weasley jolted like he’d just been kicked, and pulled out a watch, a miniature clock complete with a cuckoo poking out. “Good lord, is that the time, well, I have to go now Connor, have a good day and all that. Hope you and my Ginny get along if you’re not in Ravenclaw but end up in Gryffindor.”

With that he rushed out the bookstore, leaving Harry behind, breathing a sigh of relief. He bought his books, then exited, and then headed to an ice cream shop he’d seen before. As he sat there, Harry patted himself on the back for the close shave he’d had with Mr. Weasley, as well as thanking Ron for not having described him well enough to the man to make him recognize him.

But after he got over that, and the taste of cherry chocolate and pistachio ice cream, Harry frowned. *The books are okay, they might help me eventually, but not right away, and not to help repair that computer. Hmm… what to do?*

As he looked around the alley he saw a few kids walk by, older students from Hogwarts that might have been able to recognize him, and he ducked down pulling his cap down over his eyes. But he was still watching the quartet as they used magic to carry a large series of boxes and bags behind them. *Huh, then is it just the younger years who can’t use magic? We’re told it’s the Statute, but then my using magic alone, in my room and where no one could see me, should have passed muster. It didn’t, all it cared about was… was that I was in a nonmagical location maybe? If so, I bet I could get away with using spells here!*

*Then the only thing left to think about is how to get the computer here, and then how to repair it… hey, what’s that over there?* Harry frowned as he saw several people going down another small alleyway that he hadn’t noticed before. Finishing his ice cream, he hurried in that direction, looking down the new alleyway before looking up at the sign. *Knockturn? I, I thought that there was only the one…* Harry nearly smacked his forehead, and would have if not for remembering the hat blocking his scar from being seen. *Damn it, how stupid was I to think that!? How big is the magical world anyway?*

*Still…* He looked down at the alley, comparing its small, very dirty and dank looking appearance to Diagon, and then backed away. *Not going there, not yet. That place looks like those dank alleyways shown in those murder mysteries Vernon likes to make fun of. Best to not go there unless I have to, and with some preparation if I do.*

Unfortunately for Harry, it turned out that he did have to. The books Mr. Weasley had pointed him to were kind of interesting, but they didn’t really help Harry figure out how to either use magic without being spotted back in the land of the Fat meanies and their horse-like companion, or how to repair the computer. So Harry once more went back to the Alley.

Petunia didn’t care. His work on the garden was done, and the local wives had begun to make appreciative coos about it, which was all she cared about. He had told her that he he’d been forced to make an appointment at the bank, which could handle the issue of mail directed to him, which she bought hook line and sinker, though why the heck a bank would deal with mail Harry didn’t know. It was another bit of bull-shite but it worked.

Now with a new destination in mind, Harry dressed as rattily as he figured he could get away with in public, more Dudley castoffs and a hat made even dirtier than it had been before, the better to blend in with the rest of this new alleyway. *Although, given cleaning charms why the heck is Knockturn so dirty? Personal preference, like Ron maybe?*

Harry made his way down this seedy-by-preference alleyway keeping to the main street, looking from side to side for another bookstore or a knickknack store, anything that might be able to give him some idea as to how to either do magic without being traced or repair his computer, preferably both. That, and just generally finding out more about the wizarding world away from Hogwarts. *And getting me away from the Durlseys, that’s a major bonus right there,* Harry reflected almost cheerfully despite the dangerous environs around him. Considering that it was bright daylight and only around two in the afternoon he figured that no one was going to try to abduct a kdi who looked like he fit right in here.

Unfortunately, once more, Harry was proven wrong. He had gone about a block down the alleyway when he was grabbed from one side and dragged between buildings to his left side. “Mm, what do we have here dearie, some nice young tender meat for old Mab, hAAAK!”

Harry might not have his wand, but he had a homemade cosh made of several dozen pebbles in a large sock. It now whirled around in his hand in a desperate attack, cracking the old crone-like being who had attempted to accost him in the face and she stumbled back. Another smack to the side of the head sent her reeling and a third laid her out.

Gasping in air, Harry quickly looked around, but other than some wry smirks and grins in his direction from a few truly dirty-looking wizards, the action hadn’t seemingly drawn any negative attention his way. *Okay, so, rule number one when dealing with an enemy, when you put ‘em down, put ‘em down good and hard! Bloody hell, I’m learning all sorts of stuff these days.*

Feeling a bit full of himself despite his still pounding heart, Harry looked down the street and spotted a store sign that said Borgin and Burkes books and antiquities, which might be just the thing he was looking for. He entered quickly, not noticing that his hat had been shifted just a bit during the tussle.

Inside the shop was incredibly filled with a disorganized clutter of various odd looking furniture, knickknacks, and rows of old looking, dark-leather embossed books lining both walls. The shelves in the aisles were overflowing, but despite that, Harry couldn’t spot a single duplicate item anywhere. At the far end of the store was a long table laid out with further odd looking magical devices, including a large glowing globe, a hand that looked carved from obsidian, and several long staffs made of various types of material.

There was an old man with wide shoulders and a grim twist to his mouth standing there. “What’s a brat like you doing in here?” He barked, glaring at Harry, his eyes narrowing as he took in Harry’s appearance. “Or did you just come in here before your father or mother arrived? Ya don’t look like any pureblood I’ve ever seen…”

“That mighta be because you haven’t been overseas often,” Harry improvised once more, trying to sound like he had heard Blaise Zabini speak. “I’ma from Italy, and my parents decided I should go to Hogwarts.” Putting his newfound gift of gab to good use, he moved further into the store, looking around conspiratorially.

As he did so however, he didn’t notice the man’s eyes flying wide as he noticed Harry’s scar. A nearly gleeful look came into the man’s eyes, but he banished it as Harry looked back at him.

“I’m looking for ways to enchant muggle items,” Harry whispered, then placed a large bag of gold on the table in front of the man. “I’ma willing to pay.”

“Ahh, well then, we have a lot of things that could be enchanted muggle items, though of course that’s illegal here in Britain,” the old man said, one hand moving down below the table. Then he seemed to pause, considering. “How much are you willing to pay brat?”

“Up to a hundred galleons,” Harry replied promptly. It wasn’t as if the money was worth much to him, he had a pile taller than he was of the things, and a hundred was all he’d been able to stuff into what the goblins had called ‘a slightly expanded pouch’ but which he just thought of as a limited bag of holding. “And I’ma more interested ina doing the enchantment myself.”

“Hah, well if you have a house warded against the trace that’s all to the good then, and for a hundred galleons, I figure I can do ya something proper.” The man said, changing his tone somewhat.

The reasons for this was not what Harry thought. *Damn it, this might well be the Potter brat, but if so, I can’t just kill him here, no matter how much money that might gain me from Malfoy and others like him. Not with the Aurors already investigating me thanks to that bit of fencing I’ve been doing this past year. No, best to be subtle about this. Still, who would have thought, Dumbledore’s golden Boy Who Lived would be interested in enchanting muggle objects. And that interest makes him all the easier to trap.*

“Now, if the object you’re interested in has electricity running through it…” He waited until Harry nodded, looking a little surprised that Borgin had said the word correctly. “Well, that will mess the flow of magic through the object up. But you **can** brute force it, and maybe power it through magic instead of that muggle junk. Wait right there. I’ll be back in a moment.”

As the man left, Harry saw his reflection in the crystal and hissed, pulling his hat down over his scar again. *Crud, I hope he didn’t notice it!* With that seen to, Harry started to look at some of the books set on a small stand nearby.

A moment later, Borgin came back with two items. One was a square that looked something like black quartz, which seemed to drink in the light. The other was a simple white strip of paper with a lot of writing on it that looked Asian.

He handed both to Harry. The first one was a magical item that created lightning on command, which could be anything. The other was a talisman which would shield whatever it was placed on from other electrical things around it. “Now be sure you use ‘em right. The first has to be part of the muggle thing, the other has to be tacked on the interior, and they can’t be on the same surface either. Got it?”

Harry nodded, looking and feeling rather suspicious, but that turned around when Borgin put his hand out and said firmly, that’ll be a hundred galleons each, boy. If you don’t have the money I’ll give you one, not the other. These are expensive items, and it’ll be a wrench to get rid of them.”

Scowling Harry retorted, “And if they don’t work, if the item I’m trying toa enchanta, what then? Will you give me my money back if I return them?”

Borgin bit back a snort, but haggled back with the boy, eventually letting him talk him down to eighty galleons for one and seventy galleons for the other, with a money back agreement of only half that, plus five galleons for an Advanced Defense using the Dark Arts book. The boy left, feeling he had gotten what he wanted, without ever realizing that Borgin had been playing him too.

“Hah, if the boy can get either of those to work he’ll be dead in seconds. Either the Soul Trap and Apparator will see to that, together they’ll kill him and erase the evidence. And just as good, both of them come from the Malfoy collection. I’ll have to Obliviate my mind of the sale, but after that, and after I get rid of any evidence around the place, I won’t ever even be a suspect!” Borgin chortled, turning to enter the back of his shop. This called for a celebration.

**OOOOOOO**

Heading home Harry immediately found himself accosted by his aunt. “There you are boy, where’ve you been all this time, and why in the world are you dressed like that!? You look like a hobo, I knew you freaks were worthless if that kind of clothing is normal! gah, go around the back, I won’t have you treading dirt into my clean house. The instant you are clean, get started on dinner, Dudders and Vernon are going to be home any minute, and if their meals late you’ll answer for it.”

Harry hissed in pain as his aunt’s hand found the back of his head, but nodded docilely leaving his dirty hat and work clothes outside the door. Knowing however that Petunia would be the least of his worries if their meal was late he cleaned himself quickly and raced into the kitchen to start a meal of fried chicken and chips. Petunia huffed at that, but subsided when he prepared a simply chicken salad for her. “You’ve been leaving off your chores early twice now boy, I trust that you’ll be able to not need to do that again?”

Wincing slightly Harry thought about how to get out of this and said, “Well, I’ve done pretty much everything I need to Aunt Petunia except order next years books. If I can’t get that done in a week they’ll assume I haven’t gotten the list yet and start sending letters until I do. I’ve ordered them, but I need to go back there with my old ones to exchange them in. I didn’t know that I needed to do that.”

Petunia scowled, seeming about to say something, but subsided as Harry turned back to preparing the meal. Within minutes it was done, and Harry was allowed to go back to his room without earning another smack, although the smell of the food he’d just made wafting after him was torture in itself. Yet Vernon and Dudley had both come in as he finished, and he knew if he even tried to take some of Vernon’s favorite meal from him the fat walrus would smack him a good one.

*Still, I’ve figured out the spells, and I’ve got an item that will work to power the computer, that seems a good days work. I’ve even been able to come up with a way to return in a few days to try my new repair spells in an area where they won’t be able to detect me. At least, that’s what I think the trace means.*

For the next few days Harry did as good a job as possible on his various tasks to butter up his aunt, hoping to get a full day off in order to head to Diagon. After watching the older students and all the other people using magic in Diagon Alley, he knew he could get away with using magic there. This meant he could hopefully both practice magical theory to figure out some answers to a few of the questions that he had been wrestling with ever since the Reparo incident, and repair the computer.

It worked too. His aunt was so happy with the work he did done on the back yard, and cleaning the house, that she allowed him to “go exchange his freakish books for more freakish nonsense.”

With that lie in place, and with Petunia once more watching her soaps, Harry was able to put the bulky computer into his backpack, with some difficulty, and lug it to the bus. Carrying it into the Leaky Cauldron was equally hard, but once there, he was able to pay for a room for a day with relative ease. It appeared as if Tom was more than used to people of all ages needing rooms for what-have-you.

Harry stayed there the rest of the day, trying out various spells. He was able to make the Stupefy work without any wand movements, but couldn’t quite get it to work without verbalization. The Immobulous spell worked without even the verbalization after several dozen tries. For some reason though Harry couldn’t get any transfiguration spell to work without both wand movements and verbalization. And the first spell he’d read from the advanced Dark Arts book he’d bought from Borgin, Bombarda, didn’t work at all. Harry was obviously making a fundamental mistake somehow.

Harry scowled at that, then winced. “Um, heh, I suppose using a spell that sounds like you’re throwing around a bomb inside isn’t the best way to go about things anyway. Should’ve thought of that before I tried, if I’m honest.”

Feeling a little guilty about the fact that if the spell had worked he would have blown a hole in Tom’s wall, Harry moved on to less destructive spell work for a time, getting the Wingardium Leviosa to work without wand movements or visualization, and the Reparo spell too. Then he got to work on the computer.

With the books on how computers worked open, Harry tried to use the visual aid of the book to try to fix each little part inside the computer that he could with a repair spells. It worked for a few bits, but Harry quickly realized that some computers must differ internally from one another.

Deciding he had done as much as he could on his own, Harry pulled out the two items he had gotten from Borgin. He figured out where the power should go once it came into the computer, and slowly removed that part, the converter it was called, and placed the small black square with the runic array on it there. Hooking the wiring up to it was difficult, and Harry eventually had to just use tape to latch it together. It looks very flimflam when he stared at it, and he sighed. *This is never going to work, is it? Heck, I don’t even know if that will let me order the box thing to start powering up!*

Still, Harry wanted to try at least. With a sigh, he redid the side of the computer then put it back in his backpack. Harry hadn’t been able to bring both the computer and its keyboard or screen along, so he would have to return to the Dursleys to see if it worked.

*I am so not looking forward to carrying this home! But wait, that featherlight charm, couldn’t that work?*  A slightly more advanced version of the levitation spell that had, somewhat inadvertently, led to him becoming friends with Hermione this spell was designed to make things lighter. “Why didn’t I think of that before?”

With a sigh, he pulled out his wand again, and practiced the featherlight charm several times on the various pieces of furniture in the room, before using it on his backpack. When he picked it up this time, he nearly fell over backwards, because it was so light. “Wicked!”

He was about to go back to practicing more spells, when there was a knock on the door. He frowned, then asked “yes, who’s there?”

“Ah, Harry,” said the voice of Albus Dumbledore. “Might I come in?”

Cursing inwardly, Harry replied in the affirmative, and tries to muster up a smile for the headmaster, but knew it probably looked somewhat guilty at best. Given his suspicions about the headmaster and the teachers, he wasn’t certain how he felt about him now. After all, without the headmaster and the other teachers, especially Hagrid, he would never have discovered magic.

Yet at the same time it was the headmaster who had forced him to go back to the Dursleys again this past summer. And not only him but possibly all of the teachers must have known about how bad his home life was given where the Hogwarts acceptance letter had gone and Hagrid’s chasing after the Dursleys when they tried to run away with Harry. And the headmaster showing up now was also definitely a mark against him in Harry’s opinion.

“Might I ask what you are doing here, Harry?” Albus said with his twinkling eyes as he moved to sit on the bed only to frown, as he gently pushed it lightly to the side with a few fingers. “Ah, other than experimenting with your magic, I suppose?”

“That’s pretty much all I’m doing headmaster,” Harry said, rubbing at his hair and looking away. He didn’t wants to tell the headmaster about the computer. After all, Borgin had said enchanting ‘Muggle’ items was illegal. “I just needed to get away from my relatives for a bit. I had a bit of an accidental magic moment, and then I got this letter from a woman named Hopkins or something like that. I wanted to figure out what was going on with that too.”

“While I would be the last person to dissuade you from experimentation, there is a time and place for it, That time and place being at school,” Albus replied, his own wand in his hand and gently touching the items of the room that Harry had used the Featherlight charm on. “As for the missive from Young Hopkirk, leave that to me. She is rather too fanatical about her work at times. I’m certain that a going-on second year student having a bout of accidental magic will be excused, so long as it is not repeated.”

He turned back to Harry, at a that, smiling as Harry looks down at his feet. “But you my boy, needs to return to your family’s house.”

“Relatives Sir,” Harry said firmly, though he was still looking down at his feet. “They’re not my family. “There my relatives, there’s a distinction there.”

“Nonetheless, you are safer there than you are here. While Tom is a most excellent cook and a very decent innkeeper, he could in no way protect you from those who are your enemies because of who your parents were, who you are and who they once served.” Albus said with a sad shake of his head.

“You mean Voldemort still has followers out there somewhere? How is that possible, I would’ve thought they’d all be in that prison!?” Harry exclaimed blinking and now looking up at Dumbledore, before looking away, his face a bright red now trying to keep in his laughter. Albus was wearing a vivid red and blue cloak marked by yellow and bright green stars and smiley faces for some reason. *How did I miss that!?*

“Alas that is not the case. For many, the wheels of justice turn but slowly. For others, I am afraid that the phrase ‘money talks’ is true in our society even as it is in the non-magical society.” Albus sighed sadly. And in many ways, those who escaped justice are among the most dangerous of Voldemort’s followers. I’m afraid I can’t allow you to stay here Harry.”

He reached out to take Harry’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “Further, as I said even after I speak to Mafilda about removing the deficit against your name, you will have to be very careful about not performing any magic in your relative’s house. Our government is practically obsessed with the Statute of Secrecy, there is no allowance even for those muggle-born whose family understands and is interested in magic. Whereas with you that most certainly is not the case. The damage Vernon or Petunia could do if they tried to share the secret of magic is considerable, or would appear such to the government.”

“And I have to return there?” Harry asked duly, looking down once more. “I, professor you know…”

“Regardless, it is the safest place for you. Your mother’s protections are strongest there. And neither I nor the other teachers can always be around to defend you.” He gently shook Harry, causing Harry to look up at him, and for once, the old man’s eyes were not twinkling, the dark brown of his eyes adding to the impact of his words. “Now, I don’t want to hear about you coming to the alley again… not until the week leading up to the school year all right?” he ended with a wink.

Smiling and nodding as if he had accepted that carrot, if that was really what it was, Harry hurried over to his book bag, lifting it up over onto his shoulders, and then picking up the books. He looked over at the headmaster then but h simply chuckled. “I daresay you could give your friend Ms. Granger a run for her money with that number of books, Harry.”

Wincing at the mention of his friends, Harry debated questioning the headmaster about them, but decided against it. It was obvious that the headmaster at this point didn’t really care about Harry’s happiness, just his safety. And even that was kind of debatable given some of the things that the Dursleys had done to them over the years. They never really went out of their way to beat him except for Dudley, but Petunia had taken an iron skillet to his head at one point when he had messed up dinner. And Vernon had beaten him with a whip when Harry had brought home a better grade than Dudley during their first year in school.

*No, best to keep silent. If the Dursleys or my own boredom doesn’t kill me before school starts I’ll figure out what’s going on then.*

**OOOOOOO**

Needless to say, Petunia was not pleased with Harry when Dumbledore returned him home, and his ability to leave home ended instantly. Harry found that kind of funny when he thought about it. His relatives hated him and couldn’t have waited to see the back of Harry when he went to Hogwarts. But now that Dumbledore had come by with it like this, they were doing all they could to keep him on the property: out of sight, most certainly out of mind sure, but still there, and doing a lot of chores for them.

“I suppose the slave labor is kind of tempting then,” Harry reflected as he stared up at the ceiling again. “Oh look, there’s a spider over there. Please little guy, make something interesting for me to look at!”

Harry paused. “I just spoke aloud to a spider and hoped it would understand me. I am going barmy. Unless…” he frowned. “I was able to talk to that snake…” A few moments later Harry had determined that either the spiders were not very talkative, or he just didn’t have the knack, and he went back to being bored.

Three weeks had passed and Harry tried, he really **did** try to not perform any magic in the house. He tried to make some entertainment of his own, using the broken toys and the comic books. But there was only so many times Harry could play make-believe on his own at his age, and being locked back up in here whenever he wasn’t doing chores was just, just horrible!

And despite the amount of exercise he had gotten out while in the garden, the lack of proper food was also beginning to get to him too after several months back in the Dursleys. When Hedwig had gone hunting two nights before and brought back a squirrel rather than a rat, that squirrel had looked mighty tasty to Harry.

“Alright that’s it,” he muttered, getting out of bed as he heard downstairs the Dursleys wining and dining someone. Vernon was playing host to someone from America or something that his company was trying to do business with, although whoever decided that Vernon was the one to play host, should have their heads examined in Harry’s opinion. He doubted Vernon would be able to find America on a map, let alone talk to an American about anything without insulting him, his country, or something else. *On the other hand it could be worse; the guy could be from France. Vernon could possibly single-handedly start another war if that was the case.*

Still, Harry knew that trying to sneak out at this point would be a very bad idea, and doing magic would be even worse. So he decided to do something else with his time, something that could hopefully really serve as a real escape from the prison that had become his life.

Pulling out the parts of the computer from where he had hidden them, hooking them up together again. He had repaired the keyboard just the other day and put the talisman on the back of it, figuring that the keyboard was both part of the computer system and far enough way to not interfere with the Lightning Boc. The monitor had always worked since he’d first tried to fix it, and he thought that that Lightning Box would serve as a power source. “The only question is, will the magical government figure out that I’m doing magic if I turn this on?”

He paused for a moment, his hand hovering over the power key then he said, “You know what, I don’t care at this point! I need something to do. I can feel my brain dying!”

He was about to press the button when a voice from behind him shouted “Harry Potter must not go to Hogwarts!”

Harry whirled around a. He saw the speaker was a small creature of some kind that barely came up to his knee, with wide floppy ears, huge eyes, and a gangly body, wearing what looked like some kind of toga or something made from a tea cozy.

As the noise from below stilled for a moment, then came back even louder, Harry quickly held up a finger to his lips, saying “Please be quiet!”

The little creature nodded, his ears flopping as he did. Then he repeated himself in a near whisper. “Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts!”

Harry held up his hand then moved over to the bed and away from the computer just in case, staring at the little creature. “Okay,” he said slowly. “Now that we’re all using our inside voice, can you tell me who you are, and no offense, but what you are?”

“Oh, the great Harry Potter Sir wants to know Dobby’s name!” The little creature moaned, looking like he was going to cry in joy for a moment. “Dobby knew that Harry Potter sir was a great wizard!”

“Um, so your name’s Dobby?” Harry asked, hoping to get the little creature back on task. The hero worship was really off-putting. Harry had never been happy with the Boy-Who-Lived shite, so the little guy’s fawning was well beyond what he ever wanted to see.

“Dobby is indeed called Dobby, Mr. Harry Potter Sir,” the little being said, pointing at himself. “Dobby is being a house elf. The great Mister Harry Potter Sir has never heard of us before?”

“I can’t say I have. Although, my knowledge of the magical world is kind of limited.” Harry replied with a scowl before he shook his head. “What are house elves, and what do you do? And why are you here?”

“House elves be servants Mr. Harry Potter Sir. We be serving wizards in return for magic. Our magics be different than yours, wheeze must be bonded to use it and must mostly be using it for other people. It is how wes have always been.” Dobby explained.

“And are you here on a mission from your master?” Harry asked, asking what he thought was the next logical question given what Dobby had just said. The reaction he got told him this was not the case.

“Oh no sir,” Dobby said, now shaking his head so wildly his ears actually hit him in the face, though he didn’t seem to notice. “No sir! If master knew Dobby was being here,” Dobby shuddered. “Oh he would be punishing Dobby so hard! Dobby is a bad elf!”

He went over to a wall and looked as if he was about to bang his head on it, but Harry leaped out of the bed, and quickly put his hand between Dobby’s head in the wall. “Dobby!” He hissed “Don’t do that! You’ll hurt yourself, and then you’ll get me hurt too.”

Dobby froze at that, looking up at him in shock as Harry whispered. “The people here don’t actually like me all that much, and they’ve got important guests over. If you get me in trouble, I don’t know what they’ll do to me.”

That seemed to get through to Dobby, and he backed away rapidly from wall. “Dobby is sorry Mr. Harry Potter Sir. But Mr. Harry Potter Sir must not return to Hogwarts!”

A certain manic gleam entered his eye, which Harry noticed, and quickly spoke up to stop Dobby from doing whatever he was thinking of doing.

“I was thinking about not returning anyway Dobby,” he soothed quickly, moving back over to sit on his bed. “I’ve recently discovered that the teachers and the headmaster there don’t really seem to have my best interests at heart. I mean look at this,” he said, gesturing down towards the cat flap, “that’s where they push my food in here. And look at the Windows too. The headmaster at least knows about that stuff, yet here I am still.”

Dobby did so, and saw the bars. That and the cat flap was certainly odd, even to him. “That not normal on muggle houses then?”

“No Dobby, no it isn’t,” Harry said with a sigh. “And I can’t escape either. When I tried, the headmaster found me and returned me here. Apparently I’m safe here, but safe in this case is still trapped. It’s probably better than Hogwarts,” he went on hurriedly, not wanting Dobby to overreact and think he wanted to return to Hogwarts given how Dobby had looked a second ago. “But I’d still like to escape somehow.”

“Oh, Dobby knows all about wanting to escape,” the little creature said disconsolately. “Oh yes he does, Harry Potter sir.”

The two of them looked at one another, having an odd moment of camaraderie. It didn’t last for long, but it was there for a moment before Dobby asked suspiciously, “So Master Harry Potter Sir will not return to Hogwarts?”

“I’ll try my best not to,” Harry said with a nod then an idea occurred to him. *He got here with magic, and a owl hasn’t shown up, so maybe house elf magic can’t be detected by the government*? He gestured over to the computer, moving over to sit down in front of it. “Although, I really would like to escape from here, even if only in my own mind. Do you know what this is?”

“No, Harry Potter Sir,” Dobby replied, moving over to stare at the thing, poking it with a finger. “It looks like a strange window, connected to a box. And this other odd box thing with all these letters on it. It be looking like a typeywriter, Dobby has seen one before.”

“That’s pretty much what it is Dobby, but it all works together. It will put up pictures and stuff on this window, which we call a screen. It will allow me to play various games and other stuff, and I’ll be a lot happier to stay here. Unfortunately, my cousin broke it, and I haven’t gotten it to work just yet.” he said pushing the power button. There was a loud humming noise from the back of the computer, but nothing else happened. “I’ve tried to fix it, but…”

“OH, Dobby can help with that!” With that in the elf clicked his fingers. Instantly there was several strange sounds from inside the computer of things being rearranged, somewhat violently if the sounds were any indication, and Harry winced. But thankfully the noises stopped quickly. For a moment, Harry was worried that those sounds would carry downstairs to, but the sounds of talking and eating didn’t dissipate again, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

With that worry taken care of Harry asked, “Dobby, what did you just do?”

“Dobby simply repaired it Mr. Harry Potter Sir. This muggle thing will work now.” Dobby replied authoritatively. “Dobby has used his magic on many ‘muggle’ things for the mistress at home, including what mistress calls her ‘little friend’.”

He looked aghast, clapping his hands over his mouth but Harry didn’t question that, simply looking at him in astonishment. “That’s amazing Dobby! You don’t have to know what it looks like, or how it worked or, or anything like that to repair it? I looked up repair spells and they didn’t work like that!” He exclaimed quietly

Breathing a sigh of relief, Dobby paused thinking and clicked his long fingers. “House elves magic be different, be much more about intent and wishing. We wishing to be helpful, our magic does the rest. Now, be there anything else Dobby can do to make you want to stay here rather than Hogwarts?”

*That’s interesting, even more things I don’t know*, Harry thought, while he nodded at Dobby. “All right Dobby with that, I won’t try to return to Hogwarts, but I would like to write out a message to my friends there, tell them I’m not going, and why. The problem is I don’t know if it will actually work if I send Hedwig. She hasn’t been able to find them lately,” Harry said even as he moves towards the small broken piece of chair he used as a desk.

Because his back was turned, he didn’t see Dobby’s look suddenly turning shifty. Hedwig did, and turned her head to a ninety degree angle, her eyes narrowing and her claws creaking ominously on her perch. Dobby flinched at that then held up a hand. “Dobby thinks it will get through now.”

He frowned at that, but shrugged his curiosity about that off, anticipation and eagerness going through him to finally have something to do! He quickly wrote out a message, then tied it to Hedwig and said, “Take this to Hermione, girl.”

Harry and Dobby watched Hedwig, who glared at Dobby for another second, turned and moved towards the window huffily. Hopping to the windowsill she slid between the bars and then out into the dark of night beyond.

As Hedwig flew out of sight, Harry smiled over at Dobby and held out his hand. “Well thank you for your help Dobby, and your warning. I don’t care what your master says, you’re a good house elf!”

Dobby’s big eyes watered at that, and he shook Harry’s hand with both of his up and down wildly. “Mr. Harry Potter Sir wants to shake Dobby’s hand! Mr. Harry Potter Sir cares! Mr. Harry Potter Sir really is a great wizard! Dobby hopes that Mr. Harry Potter games will go all right, and that you won’t be returning to Hogwarts. It bes much too dangerous!” Wiping away his tears, Dobby stood back. “But now Dobby must go! Remember Mr. Harry Potter Sir, Mr. Harry Potter Sir must not return to Hogwarts!”

With that, the house elves disappeared, and Harry blinked in surprise. “That was even neater than the teleportation spell the headmaster used.” He then looked over to the computer and back again to where the house elf had been standing. “And they’re supposed to be just our servants? The magical world is weird.”

Putting that aside, Harry moved over to the computer and with baited breath pressed the power button again. To his delight, whatever Dobby had done seemed to have finally repaired the computer enough for the power to flow, even with all the modifications that Harry had put in in his own efforts to make it work. He watched as the startup screen appeared, and then loaded into windows smoothly. The noise was kind of worrisome, a deep sort of thrum in the background, and there were lights appearing out of the side of the computer, but Harry could ignore those. He was just too happy that it was finally working after literally a month working on this on and off.

What Harry didn’t know was something that most magicals learned early on in their lives: Mixing magic didn’t work very well, and never as intended unless you really, really planed it out very well. Right now, in Harry’s computer there were the remnants of dozens of repair spells from Harry, the cursed Soul-Trap, and the Apparator that he had used in his attempts to power the computer, muggle technology, and Dobby’s helpful house elf magic.

There was, in fact, more magic in that small box, then in many a store in Diagon alley. A lot more. Worse was the fact that, as any of the Weasleys who had anything to do with their father’s obsession could tell you, electrical things and magic couldn’t mix very well. To top it like a cherry on a cake of utter confusion, house elf magic was a lot more about wish fulfillment that Dobby had explained. Harry had told Dobby that he wanted to use these games to escape, and that wish began to interact very… oddly with the Soul Trap and all the rest of the magic.

With the computer working, Harry was finally able to open the CD-ROM, and found that the disc inside was disc one of Baldur’s Gate. He saw also that the icon for the game was showing up on the Windows screen. “Ah, so that’s what Dudley was playing when he had his temper tantrum this! I suppose that makes some sense.” When that game had come out, Harry had heard a lot of kids who had played it at school complain about how hard it was.

But Harry was not Dudley, and had always been interested in this game, although again how Dudley of all people had gotten his hands on a game with magic in it with how anti-magic his parents were was anyone’s guess. “I bet he got it from one of his friends, on the sly. No way would they buy it for him. Just like he did with those Dungeons & Dragons books.”

As soon as he was satisfied that the computer had stopped starting up, Harry clicked on the icon, watching the introduction video avidly for a moment, snickering slightly at the overreaction of the voice actor to the guy who was hurled off the roof by the unknown giant. After that, he was able to choose a new game after which came the skull with the glowing eyes that was the sign of the loading screen.

It seemed to go on for a long time, but Harry was willing to wait. *Although, that humming is getting kind of loud…and is it just me, or is that light getting kind of brighter?* Then there was an odd sound, almost organic, a “BLORT!” that took Harry aback. Before he could do more than think it was odd, however, the skull loading screen vanished in a blast of white light so bright Harry was blinded. The he blinked his eyes rapidly, muttering “Bloody hell! Now I know why those warnings says you should play games like this in a well-lit area!”

Blinking his eyes open, he saw a vast skull and cross bones, hurtling towards ending through him. He tried to dodge, fighting himself on his feet somehow, when he had initially been sitting on the side of his bed, looking into the video screen. How he got to be standing up he didn’t know, you see is that either. That was the last thought he had before the skull and cross bones flew through him, and everything sort of disappeared for a second, before being replaced by a gray, world all around him.

At first that was all he could see, then then two doors appeared. They were utterly identical, with the same skull in the circle with glowing eyes motif as the loading screen. “**Choose your character**!” shouted a voice from on high.

Harry blinked, staring at the doors then around him. “Where the heck am I?” He looked down at himself, and scowled. “And where the bloody hell did my clothes go!?”

The voice from before boomed out “**Choose your character**!” to that, and Harry scowled.

“Look, I don’t know what this is, but if this is Dobby’s master or some other magical taking the mickey, well done, bravo and all that, you’ve had your fun, now let me out you wanker!” Harry shouted waving his arms wildly. This amounted to nothing, but another shout from the voice repeating the words from before. Scowling, Harry started to calm down and think.

“okay, so…no one’s replying, and honestly speaking I can’t see Dobby being a party to playing a trick or something like that on me. But, choose your character, and all that noise the computer was making… I am in the game? Magic and muggle tech, well I was warned that magic and muggle tech sometimes had really odd effects. Don’t think this was anywhere near what I was warned about though. And… I, I’m literally stuck in the game, can’t feel like I’m connected to my body or anything, which means I probably can’t get out. That means…”

Harry sighed. “That means I’ve got no choice but to play through the game, great.” He smiled wryly. “On the other hand, I did want to use the game to escape, although this is a lot more literal than I expected.”

At that a small square, the exterior of which was made of yellow light appeared in front of him. Inside were the words, “Congratulations, using logic and the power of your mighty mind, you have thought things through and figured out what’s happening to you! +1 point to intelligence, +1 point to Wisdom.”

The words also rang out, this time in a tinier sort of voice rather than the deeper, more theatrical voice, and oddly enough, Harry could suddenly feel his thoughts moving faster, his panic, which he had been still thinking despite his bravado, fading. He smirked then shaking his head. “Okay that, was kind of cool, although, I can earn points even now, that means that it’s a game within a game sort of thing…I can earn points in the game by playing the game itself… no wait, that isn’t the best way to put it…”

Harry closed his eyes, thinking things through once more to try to understand what he had been thinking. “I mean, that my life is one game, and Baldur’s Gate another, or perhaps a game within the game.”

This won him another “Congratulations, through a leap of logic you have spotted an oddity in the world around you and have begun to understand your new, unique circumstances! +1 to Wisdom.”

“…I’m not certain I like that, though why only wisdom instead of intelligence and wisdom this time?” Once more Harry thought about that, and what the two terms could mean. “Maybe, maybe intelligence is basic intelligence, how smart someone is. Then Wisdom could be something like experience, or actual knowledge gained of the world around you.”

“Congratulations, through thinking things through, you have understood more about your new, unique circumstances: +1 to Intelligence.”

“Interesting.” Harry laughed. Then thought it through even more. “Hmm… if it is really a game, could there be a, a user manual. Or a Stats screen?” Looking around, he saw nothing, then he thought those words hard, saying them aloud at the same time, shifting the wording as he did. Nothing happened in terms of a user manual, but he was able to see his stats, although this wasn’t as helpful as he’d hoped.

**Status Screen**:

**Name**: Harry Potter

**Gender**: Male(?)

**Race**: Human(?)

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Wisdom: (\_\_) + 2

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\*\*\*\*

Intelligence: (\_\_) +2

\*\*\*\*

Bloodline Skills:

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*,\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Background notes**:

Trapped within a game, Harry Potter, the so-called Boy Who Lived, is now facing a life spent in a very strange land due to a mixup of magical proportions. Will he prevail, or will he find out that game over is forever?

Staring at it, Harry sighed. “Right that was singularly unhelpful, which I’d guess is the point. Although perhaps it is supposed to force me to figure things out as I go?” As he spoke that idea aloud, another status change square appeared, awarding him another point to intelligence for figuring out how to access his Status screen. “Works.”

After a few more minutes of trying to get more information to appear on his status screen or for some kind of manual to appear, Harry was flummoxed on that score and turned to the doors once more. As he did they enlarged in turn rapidly, first one then the other. Neither were marked by anything signifying what they might be though. Harry hesitantly reached out a hand toward the door on his right first.

“**You have chosen to play a female character**!”

“Wait, what!?” Harry shouted, then screamed as his body slowly shifted. His muscles creaked and groaned, and he bit off a scream, grinding his teeth and clenching his hands as the pain wound it’s way through his body, shifting and changing. When it was over, he scowled, looking down at her body for a moment, ignoring everything around him, even the voice shouting something in the background.

Harry’s body had morphed around him, becoming shorter he felt, though given he didn’t have anything around him to compare himself to that was only a feeling. His hair had become longer and changed color to red, which was interesting, and Harry rather liked the color, which he supposed came from his mother. His hands were thinner, looking like those of a girl for certain, not that he needed the hands to tell him he’d changed gender. First, he’d felt his little soldier disappearing, (and ooh boy was he not going to forget that pain anytime soon) but he was now looking down at his, or rather ‘her’ chest at present.

Given Harry was only 12 going on thirteen, he didn’t have much in the way of a chest to speak of, but Harry could feel himself blushing as he stared down at the tiny breasts there. They weren’t more than a barest curve to his chest, but even so, they were the first pair he’d ever seen, and that was enough to cause him some embarrassment.

Harry hesitantly brought his hands up to his chest, and felt at the tiny breasts shivering a little and quickly pulling his hands away. “Eep, um, okay those are, um… that was, yeah let’s not do that again.” Harry paused then, and hesitantly looked below his breasts for the first time since the change had occurred, and shivered, seeing the tiny slit there where his little soldier should be.

At only twelve, and having missed a full year of regular schooling, Harry hadn’t had anything like a biology class yet, nor any kind of discussion on the birds and bees from anyone, although later he would come to be very thankful for that, given the adults in his life before this. For now however, his knowledge of girls was very simple: one, they were girls because they had breasts and couldn’t pee standing up, two, they liked to travel in packs, three, they preferred long hair, and four, they were pretty. That was pretty much it. Oh, and an ancillary note: they could be bossy, but actually telling them they were was a very bad idea and led to lectures.

Harry also knew one other thing at this point: he was a guy! This change was not one he was happy with, and he refused to go along with it. With that thought, and after calming down, he became aware of what was going on around him in this strange between place again for the first time since the change to his body had hit. “Okay, please, oh please tell me there’s a way to undo this bullocks!”

As he looked up, Harry saw hovering in front of him above head height were several of the announcement boxes, all piled on one another. “That is something to be aware of in the future, I’ll need to be aware of the fact they pile on one another like that. I don’t want to click through them and miss an important message, if such a thing happens anyway.”

Reaching forward, Harry deleted the topmost message, which read, “Ouchie! You have grinned (rather grimaced) and bore through pain the likes of which would set most people to screaming. Does this make you brave, or just too stubborn for your own good? Only time will tell: + 4 to Constitution, +4 to Willpower.”

“Nice, or well, not really because that was ruddy awful, and I could do without the sarcasm. But I’ll take the points. And it tells me another stat I’ll need to be aware of too.” As he thought that, Harry could feel his body somehow toughening up, his muscles growing. “Wicked!”

The next box wasn’t as helpful, in fact, it was downright insulting. “Oops! You have chosen randomly and very poorly: -1 to Luck.”

“Oh, screw you! How was I supposed to know that door would do that! There was no way to choose between them! Ruddy game,” Harry groused, tapping out of that box too. “Still, that’s another Stat I know about anyway.”

Thankfully, the next box was good news, sort of. “Know Thyself! Even when dealing with a true moment of gender confusion that should have caused at worst an existential crisis you kept a mental image of yourself as a boy. Knowing yourself so well can only be good in the long run: +2 to Willpower.”

“I am seriously uncertain how to take that. I mean, yes it’s helpful, but I could have done without the moment of gender confusion in the first place,” Harry groused.

The next box was the one he had been hoping, nay, praying to see, and Harry paused, staring at it, taking in the details. This box was different than the stat boxes, which were lined in yellow light with nothing but the words inside. Instead, this box was lined with a blinking red light, and backed by something that looked like a wooden background, onto which the words “**You have chosen to play a Female Character, is this correct?**” Was emblazoned on top, while below were two buttons looking as if they stuck out of the wood, with the word ‘**No’** in red, and the word ‘**yes’** in green.

“Oh, Merlin, Morgana and Maeve thank you!” Harry muttered, and then very carefully reached for the no button. The door he had previously opened closed abruptly. Instantly the pain was of the transformation was back, but Harry bore through it, grimacing and growling to himself, eager to get the stat points and regain his real body.

After removing the stat screen that told him he had been awarded with two more points to willpower and constitution. This once more told Harry something else about the game: there would be limited rewards for going through the same thing twice. Setting that thought to one side for now for more important things, Harry resolutely turned to the other door and opened it.

Another red-lined box appeared in front of him, with the words “**You have chosen to play a Male Character, is this correct?”** This was unaccompanied by further pain, which was a blessing. Harry instantly hit the green button, and watched in something approaching excitement as the gray background of the universe around him changed, shifting into a wooden lined hallway, the way forward blocked by several glass doors, on which were words, though Harry couldn’t make out more than the words on the first at present.

Those words read “**Choose your Character’s race**!”

As soon as Harry touched that door the hallway disappeared to be replaced by several doorways cone more all around him. Each doorway had a different image on it of a different race. These included, Human, Elf, half-elf, Half-orc, gnome, and dwarf.

“Wait, so I can choose my race, okay, that is interesting this is getting better and better,” Harry mused, grinning. The images here were pretty self-explanatory too, in Harry’s opinion, and Harry ignored them to read the information on the races.

Humans were, generally speaking, the best jacks of all trades, able to do any job or class, although their lives were of course not the longest. Elves specialized in dexterity, telling Harry another stat, archery of course, and magic, with half elves being somewhere between that and humans in that they could wear heavier armor and be stronger physically. They tended to also have a bonus to charisma another stat label, but not as much as Elves. But both elf and half-elf could not have much constitution as a human.

Harry didn’t even read the descriptions of Half-orcs after seeing the image, skimming to the bottom to see the stat bonuses and limitations. He wasn’t vain or anything like that, but he certainly would prefer to not have green skin and tusks. He also knew just enough about most fantasy games to understand orcs were one of the perennial bad guy races. A part of Harry wanted to champion them for that reason but the looks, and the minus to dexterity and wisdom he saw was enough for him to give that a miss.

Gnome and dwarf he disqualified for somewhat of a similar reason. “I might be short, but that doesn’t mean I like being short darn it. No thank you. Although that stat bonus to constitution the dwarves have is neat, and the massive bonus to working with metal. But no. And the bonus to alchemy and potions for gnomes sounds uninteresting too, plus the minus to charisma.”

Harry’s interest in potions had died after a year of dealing with Snape and his hatred for all things Potter. *I still have to wonder why, if the Headmaster was right and my father saved his life, he hated me so much?*

That left humans, elf and half-elf to choose from and eventually after thinking it through, Harry chose human. The adverse impact to constitution was something he didn’t want to deal with, as well as the inability to wear heavy armor for some reason. “I wonder what that’s about.”

Harry also remembered that most of this game was set in a human realm, so figured he could blend in better with those around him if the game was that realistic. Considering what was going on all around him, Harry wasn’t certain what the actual game would be like after he was finished with this character creation section, but wasn’t willing to act as if everything would be like a game, just in case. He could all too easily remember the ‘game over is forever’ line.

This won him yet another bonus point to Wisdom, which Harry chuckled at before making his choice. No change occurred to his body just yet, which again he was pleased about, but he found himself clothed now in a simple cloth shirt and leather pants. That threw him for a moment but Harry then smacked his forehead. “Right, Middle ages, only cloth and leather, no jeans… what are jeans made of anyway? But I suppose leather at least is hard wearing, and it isn’t tight or anything.”

As he was saying that aloud, the glass door disappeared from in front of him and Harry found his feet moving on their own towards the next one. *That had better be just a part of the character creation bit, I don’t want my body moving on my own for me in the future.* He thought with a slight grimace before the next glass door rapidly expanded.

“**Choose your appearance!”** This time there were more doors, each of them with detailed images and various choices underneath in a series of blocks. The topmost image was that of a Human body from the waist up, the one below that a face, each of them set next to a series of choices, one of which, under the face, was hair color. “Huh.”

Harry moved around the room, noting that he could change his body type: thin, fat, strong, tall, short that sort of thing, with the choice of which door to look at. All of them looked like a Seventh year or so, a few looked older than that, but not by much. “Huh, so I won’t be starting at my own age, or level or whatever, are they equivalent? Whatever the case, that’s a little weird, although thinking back about it, I guess the game is supposed to be set after the main character’s come of age or something similar. It will sure be weird being that did all of a sudden though.”

The idea also excited him, as did the concept of being in a new, better body. Harry knew his own scrawny frame wasn’t exactly handsome or well built, whatever Wood said about it being the ideal build for a seeker. Being skinny was something to be proud of. Being malnourished and both short and skinny because of it was not.

With that in mind, and the fact this game was set in a fantasy swords and magic sort of realm, Harry chose the image that looked the most like the typical warrior image, something like Cohan the Barbarian: big, six feet four inches, with wide, muscled shoulders and a six pack that put even Oliver Woods (they all showered together after practice and the captain was the only person Harry had ever seen with a six pack) to shame, with wide, powerful arms.

Once he chose that door, the face below the body image and the choices set beside it allowed him to change a few things in his appearance, bearded, long hair, short hair, that kind of thing. He noticed that even the short hair looked messy, and tried at several doors to change that, only to fail. And his scar stayed the same in each image too.

That Harry had mixed feelings about, much like the scar itself. For a long while it had been a sign of his freakishness, of how his parents had died in a car crash. Then it had become something to be sort of proud of a sign of his mother’s love, the sign that something she had done had saved him from the killing curse, leaving him with only that mark to bear. Then it had become a sign of the Boy Who Lived nonsense, just another thing that set him apart from those around him, that made Harry famous for something he hadn’t had a part in really.

Still, on mature reflection, (which won him another bonus intelligence point) Harry decided he was fine with the scar remaining. “I honestly don’t know what I’d be like without it, after all.” Harry also decided to keep his eye and hair color, although he did make his hair long and shaggy though. “I figure I can always come back and change that with a razor or something, and I remember all the images about warriors, knights and barbarians back in the Middle Ages showed that most of them had long hair anyway. The beard though… no, that thing just looks weird.”

Once he was satisfied with his image, Harry touched the green button which once more indicated yes, in this case yes the combined image was acceptable, grimacing his teeth. As he had expected, His body once more shifted and changed and grew, expanding and morphing to match the image he had chosen. This won him more bonus points to Constitution and Willpower, but Harry shook his head groggily as it finished. “Bloody hell, I hope I don’t have to get used to that feeling, that is not fun!”

As his feet started moving forward once more against his will, Harry looked down his body, flexing and smiling. “Damn me, but this is cool! Just look at these arms! I bet I could bench press a rugby player now!” As he walked though Harry felt a little chapped in the trouser area, and frowned, reaching down to rearrange himself only to blink. “What the heck, that grew too! Bloody hell, I hope I don’t have to ride a broom, I had enough trouble sometimes with that already.”

“Congratulations? You have discovered a negative (?) impact of shifting your body to that of an 18 year-old man. Remember, learning about yourself is sometimes just as important as learning about other people. +1 to Intelligence.”

“Okay, now I know this game’s taking the mickey!” Harry groused, still shifting somewhat uncomfortably, rearranging himself with one hand, pressing his rod to lay within the pant leg to one side, while dismissing the stat bonus box with the other.

By this time Harry’s feet had Harryd him to the next glass door and again it disappeared as he did. “**Choose your character’s class**!” Again as the door disappeared, it was replaced by a series of others, eleven in all, although one of them was blacked out. Each bore both an image of a simple stick figure on the top holding different items, and words below it describing the various classes.

The images were ultra-simple in comparison to the ones Harry had been dealing with up to now, but the words made up for it in a way, describing each class in turn well enough for Harry to understand the pluses and minuses to each and Harry carefully read through each in turn starting with the image of a stick figure holding what was obviously a wizard’s staff.

MAGE:

The mage strives to be a master of magical energies, shaping them and casting them as spells. To do so, he devotes much of his time to magical research. A mage must rely on knowledge and wit to survive. Mages are rarely seen adventuring without a retinue of fighters and men-at-arms. Because there are different types (or schools) of magic, there are different types of mages. The generalist mage studies all types of magic and learns a wide variety of spells. This makes him well suited to the demands of adventuring.

Special Abilities: Spell Casting.

Restrictions: cannot wear armor, can only wield daggers, staffs, darts, and slings.

Specialization classes: Specialist Mage, Wild Mage.

*These specializations can be learned through your actions and quests throughout the game.*

“Okay, that is so much bull-shite! Restrictions, why the heck can’t a mage wear armor!? I mean, I could see a mage starting off as a weak sort of guy or woman, and not having any physical abilities because of how much time they would have to spend learning spells, but not being able to get around that?” Harry groused , shaking his head.

Thinking about it, he tried to click on the underlined word there, and got a bland **“Restrictions are limitations most classifications come with. For every positive there must be a negative.”**

Scowling, Harry backed away from that door.*While I may be able to get around that restriction somehow if this game becomes more like a real life but with stats and stuff, I can’t bet on that being the case. No, best to look at all of them, then figure out the best one to take for the long term. Besides, I have to wonder about whether or not the spells I know from my own life will really translate into the game.*

With that in mind, Harry, ignoring the fact he’d just gained another intelligence point, turned away from that door to the black one, experimentally reaching for it.His arm bounded off the door as if he had just smacked it into a stone wall, and the voice of the game intoned, “**Because of your past decisions in this character creation process, you are no longer eligible to start as a Sorcerer. You can learn this class as a secondary classification later through your actions or quests**.”

“Huh. Okay, doesn’t seem to be anything I can do about that. Next.” The next turned out to be marked by a stick figure holding a bow and with a smaller stick figure with for legs and a large fanged head beside it.

Ranger:

The ranger is a hunter and a woodsman. He is skilled with weapons and is knowledgeable in tracking and woodcraft. The ranger often protects and guides lost travelers and honest peasant-folk. A ranger needs to be strong and wise in the ways of nature to live a full life.

Special Abilities: Weapon Specialization, Racial Enemy, Stealth, charm person/mammal

Restrictions: Human, Elf or Half-Elf only

Specialization Classes: Archer, Ranger, Beast Master

*These specializations can be learned through your actions and quests throughout the game.*

This class had no restrictions in armor type and Harry really liked the idea of weapon specialization and charm person/mammal, which like the rest was rather self-explanatory. The specialization classes though sounded kind of lame in his opinion, and far too restricted to being useful in nature. *Sure most of the game might happen on the road, but what if the Ranger gets a negative bonus or something in cities?* “Still, it’s a possibility. I’m definitely not going to make a choice without examining all of these classifications closely.”

That earned him another set of bonus points to intelligence and wisdom. “Making an informed decision! Your desire to know all you can before making a choice that will change you for the rest of your life shows you are learning! +2 to Intelligence and + 2 Wisdom.”

“I don’t know if that was praise or snark really, but I’ll take it.” Harry muttered, going on to the next door.

Fighter:

The fighter is a champion, swordsman, soldier, and brawler. He lives or dies by his knowledge of weapons and tactics. Fighters can be found at the front of any battle, contesting toe-to-toe with monsters and villains. A good fighter needs to be strong and healthy if he hopes to survive.

Special Abilities: Advanced Weapon Specialization

Restrictions: None

Specialization classes: Kensai, Wizard Slayer, Berserker*.*

*These classifications can be learned through your actions and quests throughout the game.*

“Ooh okay, I really like the idea of Advanced Weapon specialization…” With that idea, Harry clicked on those words, and thankfully a smaller box popped up with more information. He learned that there was a limit to how many ‘skill slots’ most classifications could put into their skill with various weapons types. Rangers, for example, could only put three slots down, then add one more to any single weapon. Mages could only use one skill slot per the limited number of weapons they could use in the first place. How that would equate to his ‘life as a game’ thing, Harry didn’t know, but once more, he didn’t like the idea of restrictions.

“Definitely an option, especially that Wizard Slayer specialization if there are a lot of powerful mages in the game. Kensai sounds Oriental, nothing against that, I just have no idea what it could mean.” When Harry clicked on ‘specialization classes’ and thereafter the actual names however, he didn’t see any more information. With that Harry moved to the next door.

Paladin:

A paladin is a warrior bold and pure, the exemplar of everything good and true. Like the fighter, the paladin is a man of combat. However, the paladin lives for the ideals of righteousness: justice, honesty, piety and chivalry. He strives to be a living example of these virtues so that others might learn from him as well as gain by his actions.

Special Abilities: Weapon Specialization, Lay Hands, Turn Undead, +1 point to Willpower with every level after Level 4,

Automatically learns Protection from Evil, Detect Evil with every other level

Restrictions: Human only

Specialization classes: Cavalier, Undead Hunter, Inquisitor

“EEEE!!!!” Harry squealed, which was very odd coming from his now barrel-like chest, as every dream of being a hero and knight he had ever had going through his head as he read this job’s description. He almost chose it at once, especially once he saw the Detect and Protection of Evil, which were self-explanatory, as well as the Lay hands, which was obviously some kind of healing spell. But he stopped and looked at the ‘human only’ statement, and the last Specialization class. “Inquisitor? Yeah, that sounds a little… bad. And human only too, does that mean there’s racism in the game?”

This line of thinking won him a intelligence point again for, “Thinking long term: You have identified a small clue and made a logical leap to try and figure out more about the world around you. While you don’t know the answer, that doesn’t mean thinking about the question was a bad move.”

“Huh, that was helpful. Yet even so, there are undead in this game, so Paladin is definitely a choice. Still, next.” On the next door Harry read out:

BARBARIAN:

A barbarian can be an excellent warrior. While not as disciplined or as skilled as a normal fighter, the barbarian can willingly throw himself into a berserker rage, becoming a tougher and stronger opponent.

Special Abilities: Fast movement, berserker rage, high hit points.

Restrictions: Cannot wear full plate, plate mail. Can't specialize past normal specialization.

“Nope!” Harry chuckled. “I can see myself becoming many things, but a Berserker raging all over, nope. And I’ve always felt not getting hit was better than being able to take a lot of damage. Next please.”

This statement won him another intelligence point for “Spotting the obvious” And Harry growled, now knowing the game was somehow being snarky on purpose. Despite that, he moved onto the sixth door.

P R I E S T S:

The cleric is a generic priest (of any mythos) who tends to the spiritual needs of a community. He is both protector and healer. He is not purely defensive, however. When evil threatens, the cleric is well suited to seek it out on its own ground and destroy it.

Special Abilities: Turn Undead, Spell Casting

Restrictions: Cannot use bladed or piercing weapons.

Specialization classes: Specialization classes for this classification will be dependent on which god you choose to serve. This change is instant, and will have far reaching effects, choose wisely!

“Again, no.” Harry muttered, shaking his head and moving on. “I like the idea of spellcasting, but unable to use bladed or piercing weapons is just weird, and I don’t like the idea of needing to choose a god to serve instantly. That sounds way too much like it could have long term ramifications.”

Yet again that bit of forward thinking won him a “Spotting the obvious: + 1 to intelligence” stat bonus, which Harry just laughed at this time before going on.

DRUID:

The druid serves the cause of nature and neutrality; the wilderness is his community. He uses his special powers to protect it and to preserve balance in the world.

Special Abilities: Shape Change, Spell Casting

Restrictions: Human or Half-Elf only. Can wear leather armor and bucklers only. Can only wield clubs, darts, spears, daggers, slings, and staffs.

Specialization classes: Totemic Druid, Avenger, Shapeshifter

“For the third time, no. Shapeshifter sounds interesting, like Animagi almost, but the restrictions in gear is a bit much. And I think most of the rest sounds too restrictive in what kind of actions I could take, if my actions can be restricted by class anyway.” Bing came another intelligence point for ‘Thinking long term’, and Harry came to the eighth door.

Monk:

Monks are warriors who pursue perfection through contemplation as well as action. They are versatile fighters, especially skilled in combat without weapons or armor.

Though monks cannot cast spells, they have a unique magic of their own based around the energy of their bodies. This ki allows them to perform amazing feats. The monk's best known feat is their ability to stun an opponent with an unarmed blow.

Special Abilities: Martial arts, magic resistance, fast movement, lay on hands, thief abilities (stealth and detect traps).

Restrictions: Cannot wear armor, cannot use two-handed weapons. Cannot raise relations past friendship.

Reading this class, Harry felt as if he was missing something. It just sounded, beyond the no armor or two-handed weapons thing, too good to be true. There had to be a downside to it, something that wasn’t being shown. No chance was it as good as it looked.

After a moment staring at the restrictions, Harry thought he had it, “Monks are, what’s the word, um, ascetic I think? They can’t drink, party or anything like that, at least from what I’ve heard about. They’re a holy order, like priests. Huh, I wonder why it doesn’t mention that and instead says that bit about raising relationships past friends. Oh, maybe they can’t marry then? Weird, and not exactly an issue, at least I hope not. But still, I just can’t see myself as a monk.”

On the next door, Harry read:

THIEF:

To accomplish his goals, for good or ill, the thief is a skilled pilferer. Cunning, nimbleness and stealth are his hallmarks. Whether he turns his talent against innocent passers-by and wealthy merchants or oppressors and monsters is a choice for the thief to make. There are seven thief abilities in Baldur's Gate II.

Special Abilities: Open locks, find traps, pick pockets, move silently, hide in shadows, detect illusions and set traps.

Restrictions: cannot wear any armor other than leather or studded leather; cannot use any shield except for bucklers; can only wield clubs, daggers, darts,

Specialization classes: Assassin, Bounty Hunter, Swashbuckler.

Here again Harry ran up against the same problems he had initially with the mage class, that of where ‘life’ ended and ‘game’ began and the, to his mind, bizarre restrictions. *After all, anyone can learn how to find traps, open locks etc, I’d assume they’d need a lot of dexterity to do it, but I’d bet they could still try it. Detect illusions and hide in shadow though is probably class-specific. But Restrictions again make no sense, I mean, only wielding clubs? Come on! The Swashbuckler specialty sounds interesting though.*

Yet it was the lack of armor that really killed this class for Harry. As much of a proponent of not getting hit as he was, he still would prefer to be able to wear heavy armor if the situation called for it. “After all, what would be the point of this new powerful body of mine if I couldn’t?”

At last Harry came to the last door. But here again, he was somewhat disappointed.

BARD:

The bard is also a rogue, but he is very different from the thief. His strength is his pleasant and charming personality. With it and his wits he makes his way through the world. A bard is a talented musician and a walking storehouse of gossip, tall tales and lore. He learns a little bit about everything that crosses his path; he is a jack-of-all- trades but master of none. While many bards are scoundrels, their stories and songs are welcome almost everywhere.

Special Abilities: Pick Pockets, Bard Songs, Spell Casting, High Lore ability.

Restrictions: Human and Half-Elf only cannot use a shield or armor heavier than chain mail.

Specialization classes: Blade, Jester

“Okay, weaponized witticism sounds fun, and I could totally see Lavender or the Twins picking this, but I don’t fancy singing all that much, and I hate gossip. And once again, the restrictions are ruddy awful. Nope. That leaves me with the Paladin, Ranger and Fighter builds.” Harry blinked as, at those words, the doors of the classes he had eliminated disappeared, allowing him to more easily compare the builds. “That’s handy.”

Examining the trio of base builds side by side, Harry decided rather reluctantly to remove the Ranger build from consideration. While he liked a lot of what that build offered, he just couldn’t see the specialization classes as that much of a leg up from the original, not without more information which he couldn’t access. He even chose the Ranger build to see if that would let him access more information, before backing out once more. *Plus, Rangers seem to be more about fighting at range, and if I have to fight in a building or up close suddenly I could run into trouble.*

At this point, Harry was racking his brains for everything he could remember about what other kids had said about this game, and not having much luck. He could remember that you formed parties, but that occasionally you had to fight alone, although how you formed parties and what that meant, beyond the obvious, was something he couldn’t quite bring to mind. So he was thinking long term and also about going it alone if he had to.

After a moment, that made him decide in favor of the Paladin build. The Fighter was interesting, and he wished he could find out more about the Kensai and Wizard Slayer upgrades. The advanced weapon specialization skill was nothing to sneeze at either. But Harry figured he had a fifty/fifty chance of possibly overcoming that kind of thing. And the Lay on hands skill, plus all the anti-undead skills were just too good to pass up. The only thing that would make him back off of it was if he had to choose a specific god to serve right away, and if the background story showed paladins were also racists Like Malfoy and his lot.

When he clicked on it, Harry learned that he didn’t have to worry about the first problem at least as the voice Harry had begun to think of as the voice of the game within the game, boomed out a bit of backstory like it had earlier for the Ranger build. **“You have spent your years at Candlekeep training your mind, body and soul to battle evil wherever you find it in the land. Your skills and general abilities are such you should be ready to sit your vigil, yet there is no chantry or temple within the walls of Candlekeep to any god who has a paladin order. And, given the fact you would have to find a rare tome that the Keep, the greatest library in the world, does not already possess to get back in, you have put off the choice of which Chivalric god to pledge to. This puts you in the odd position of having many of the Paladin’s low level skills, but none of the specialized God-given abilities all Paladins possess.”**

From there, Harry could choose several starting skill slots in various weapons-craft. This was a list of weapons comprised of various pictures, like two handed swords, halberd, short swords and others, including sword and shield, and crossbow. Beside each was a series of four boxes, then a ‘specialized zone’ besides two-handed sword, shield and sword, and war-hammers.

Harry frowned, thinking about how exactly this would work out in the future. *Will it be a boost to speed and strength when I use a weapon I’m better with, will certain weapons have restrictions not just of class or strength, but affinity with that weapon type?*

\*BING!\* “A Well-thought moment of Introspection: Thinking deeply about the meaning of your own abilities and how it could affect your future has shown you are growing in knowledge: +2 to wisdom.” The stat box stated.

This time the status change had an immediate effect Harry could feel. Somehow he now knew that his guess was correct: certain weapons would have skill restrictions, mostly the hammers and greatswords which paladins were famous for wielding. Furthermore, after a certain skill level Harry could learn and use special attacks. “Bloody Wicked that is!” Harry crowed thrusting a well-muscled arm into the air.

With that in mind, Harry looked closely at the weapons paladins could use. Building on his previous ideas about wanting to be as strategic in his thinking as possible, Harry figured that wielding a single handed weapon would be best, and he was pleased to see that there were no weapons restrictions here.

Weapon and shield style also gave a lot of bonuses against damage both ranged and close combat, although Harry had to wonder once more about how that would work out. *Maybe my body will move on it’s own, or, or I’ll see the attacks coming faster or something? This whole skill thing is bothering me.*

\*BING!\* “A Well-though moment of Introspection times two: While you might find skills bothersome, you are still thinking them through and how they might play out in the future, showing great foresight: +2 to wisdom.” The stat box stated.

Again the effect was immediate, and Harry realized he was sort of correct, but not quite. When wielding a sword and shield, his off hand, the shield, would move automatically to block any blow up to the level of his skill that Harry didn’t consciously see coming as well as long range attacks. On the attack, Harry’s strikes would be stronger, faster, but no more skilled per se. That would come with practice and the skill slots spent on that particular weapon.

With that in mind, and Harry not wanting to have to try to find a specific weapon Harry put three of the six skill points he had into Weapon and Shield, then one in warhammer, then two in longsword, figuring that it would be the weapon most prominent in the game.

As soon as he was done, that door disappeared, to be replaced by the old corridor again. Once more Harry found his feet moving for him, and he scowled. *If that is how it will feel when my shield moves I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.*

When Harry reached the next glass door, it shifted, only this time it became a screen composed of two parts as the Baldur’s Gate game voice boomed out “**Roll your stats**.”

One side was a giant die withseven sides of all things, each side showing both a number and a different color. Above that were four asterisks, implying Harry would have four more to spend wherever he wanted, beyond being able to re-roll his basic stats. On the other side was the status screen fro before, but it showed more information than before, a **lot** more, and Harry read it avidly from top to bottom.

**Name:** Harry Potter.

**Gender**: Male

**Race**: Human

**Class:** Paladin level 5

Strength: (6)

Willpower: (14) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (23)

Constitution: (9) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (2) + 7

Charisma: (10) +4

Intelligence: (10) +9

Luck: (16) +/- 4

Bloodline Skills:

Potter Luck, Gamer’s mind, Parselmouth, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Background notes**:

Trapped within a game, Harry Potter, the so-called Boy Who Lived, is now facing a life spent in a very strange land due to a mixup of magical proportions. Will he prevail, or will he find out that game over is forever?

Most of the points he had waiting to be added to his basic stats Harry remembered receiving as he created his new body/character/life (he as uncertain what to call it, and how permanent everything he was feeling was so it could be any or all of those), but the Luck and Charisma additions were new. “And the underline there makes me think that it’ll stay there when I’m past this screen too, and what’s with the plus and or minus thing? Also, my base wisdom was that low!? Ouch, just ouch.”

Frowning, Harry first out his hand on the numbers in question but got nothing. Then he moved down to the Bloodline Skills, which he had already been interested in. *I suppose the skills I can’t see are things I’ll need to learn about myself as I go rather than already know.*

“’Gamer’s Mind: You are trapped in a game, but not panicking or screaming for someone to save you, this level of mental control is part of a Gamer’s mind, which will never allow you to panic. Immune to fear effects, but not mind control or other mental ailments and assaults,’” Harry read aloud, frowning. “I guess it is kind of weird that I’m not panicking more than I am and am taking all this in stride.” He shrugged. “Well, I suppose that I can’t do anything about it for now.”

After that, Harry turned to the next, which was Parselmouth. “’Parselmouth, the ability to speak to snakes. Can be useful when facing poisonous snakes, and can rather make you popular with the girls too’. Wait, what? How can talking to snakes make me popular with girls?”

Staring at that message for a bit, it was a few seconds before Harry could let that weird note go, turning his attention to Potter Luck. “Potter Luck, is it lucky or unlucky? Regardless, thanks to your family’s blood, whenever chance is involved you can bet it will either go better or far worse than you can imagine. Also brings along a permanent charisma bonus, because Potter’s have always been popular, if you know what I mean.’ Okay, again, not certain where that came from, but I guess given my year in Hogwarts I can see where it’s coming from. Except for that Charisma bonus, but I won’t question it.”

With those questions answered, Harry turned his attention to the actual stats, reading each description in turn.

Luck turned out to be more important than he expected, though thankfully not so much in battle. Harry had heard kids curse a lot about saving throws and suchlike, but this didn’t seem to be the case here. “I guess there is a limit to how game-like combat can be if your, well, being the actual player instead of just playing the game from the outside.”

Wisdom, Intelligence, Constitution, Strength, Dexterity also showed no surprises. Wisdom and Intelligence combined to be his basic mental acumen, his ability to retain, use and analyze knowledge. The other three were his physical stats, which combined showed how strong, tough and quick he was as well as his physical endurance. “Oy, I knew I was weak for me age before, but come on, I’ve got these massive muscles now!”

Apparently that hadn’t Harryd over just yet, and Harry fought to keep an unmanly pout off his face. These stats, Harry realized, had to be his stats from before he was caught in this game. Just as an experiment, which earned him another intelligence point, Harry tried to use the four stat points he had to add to his largest stat, that of Dexterity and he could feel himself move a bit faster, and stronger. “Hmm… I wonder… I have to think that physical skills can only be taken to a certain degree, after all there is a physical limit to how strong or fast someone can be.”

That line of thought earned him yet another point in wisdom, and this prompted Harry to look at the last few stats. “’Durability, the physical durability of your body minus your armor. Note, as a squishy human, there is marked limit to how durable you can become. That’s why god created armor.’ Funny, really funny wisearse. Still, again nothing I can do about that beyond reroll I guess, and I’m way more concerned about my strength stat. Paladin or no, there’s a limit to what I can do with such a small strength stat.”

The description of Charisma was surprising. It wasn’t just about how good he looked, charisma effected how others reacted to him, how good he could haggle, how more likely he was to be able to talk other people to his point, how he was able to gather attention or not as he chose. It also mentioned something about being attractive to the other sex ‘or whichever team you batted for’, which Harry barely understood enough of to blush over.

Willpower was simply immensely interesting and even without the bonus to constitution Harry would have felt the pain he’d gone through was worth it for this. Harry would have thought willpower tied into the mental aspects already covered by Intelligence and Wisdom, but it didn’t. This stat directly effected how protected a person’s mind was to domination, intimidation, demonic and undead auras, as well as direct magical mental assaults of all sorts. “Wicked…”

With his curiosity satisfied, Harry instantly removed the extra stat points from Dexterity, and put his hand over the large die, rerolling his stat. Instantly however, he cursed the flippant way he did so as his body changed and shifted inside. “GAHH!!”

This wasn’t as painful as it had been earlier, but it still brought back to Harry the fact this was serious. A moment later as he felt the difference in his body, and looked at his new stats wonderingly. Harry quickly noticed the base starting stats was composed of a hundred points, but now how they were distributed had shifted, his body transforming as a result. *I have to assume that’s because of my new character’s age and the fact I’m starting at level five. Regardless, the additional stats don’t seem to matter to the hundred I reroll with.*

Strength: (16)

Willpower: (10) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (7) + 7

Charisma: (12) +4

Intelligence: (1) +10

Luck: (16) +/- 4

“Okay, wow, okay, this, this is real… wow.” Harry muttered, staring from his body up to the screen in front of him, feeling the differences in both the way his body reacted, how solid it felt, and how he had to force himself to concentrate more on what he was trying to do now than he had before.

“\*BING\*” A new screen popped into being to one side. “Master of the Obvious: for spotting something so obvious it really, **really** should have occurred to you before this, you have earned one intelligence point. Pretty soon you’ll be as about as intelligent as a teenager should be instead of a cloistered toddler. +1 to intelligence.”

“OY, just oy!!” Harry groused before shaking his head and ignoring the stat change. Still, it was obvious given how hard he was having to concentrate that this reroll just wouldn’t do. *“I might want to be a Paladin, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be able to think as well as I was before. And that luck stat is just wrong.* With that he hit the die again and it rerolled, while his body shifted to match his new stats.

Strength: (19)

Willpower: (10) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (9) + 7

Charisma: (10) +4

Intelligence: (6) +11

Luck: (8) +/- 4

With that third reroll Harry was satisfied. With the additional points he’d earned, that was a damn good build. Harry thought about it, then put in two of the extra stat point into luck, the other two into Charisma, figuring that being able to make deals and such would be a good thing in the future. With that, his stats were complete, and he hit the large green ‘is this okay’ button at the bottom of the screen.

Instantly the screen and the corridor disappeared, to be replaced by the skull with glowing eyes set in the circle once more. “**Welcome to Baldur’s Gate, try not to die!”**

“Oh, now even the BG voice is a snarky arse!?” Harry shouted, before darkness took him.

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time that Harry had been creating his character, back in what could be euphemistically be called the real world, things had suddenly and quite abruptly gone awry for one elderly gentleman in a certain Scottish castle.

Albus Dumbledore had been doing paperwork. This in itself was nothing unusual. He was head of the Wizengamot, Chief Warlock of the ICW, and of course Headmaster of Hogwarts. All three jobs created paperwork like nobody’s business, even for magicals. Yet he had long since created a spell to help him with this, sifting through paperwork. The important information that he had to take note of would glow and anything unimportant would sort itself out. After that another spell to write his name or what have you and the work flowed quickly and efficiently.

*Best charm spell I ever developed*, he thought to himself cheerfully as he finished in a day what would take most people at least four or five.

This was the secret to why he could hold as many jobs as he did. Mind you, Albus often wondered if he actually did the job as well as someone else would have. After his long, rather storied career, questioning himself like that was part and parcel of the individual that was Albus Dumbledore. But he always came back to the same point: If he wasn’t the one doing it, who knows what his successor would do with this amount of power? Given how many pureblood people have been able to buy their way out of jail here in the UK, this was no small consideration, nor was it ego per se.

Albus could not control who would get either job here in Britain if he stepped down, and so he simply didn’t. Stepping away from the Chief Warlock position was a possibility, and one he was thinking of hard these days, but even there he had misgivings on a few of the people who might succeed him.

However, what was about to occur took his mind off of all three of those jobs with a suddenness that would have caused any non-magical person who looked as old as Albus did to have a heart attack.

There was a loud popping trailing whistle from one side of the headmaster’s quarters, and Albus looked up with shock as several knickknacks among the bookshelves to one side of the door imploded. He noticed Fawkes leaping away from his perch with a squawk but ignored his familiar for now, his eyes wide behind his glasses.

First to go was the Monitor Stone that he had connected to the Blood Wards around the Dursleys. The simple device simply shattered, the granite of it breaking like so much glass. The next thing that occurred was something tied directly to Harry, Albus having taken the opportunity to do so when Harry was unconscious at the end of the year. This was a much more complex device, consisting of two compass-like devices set into small 360 degree mantles to either side of one another. Currently tied into two large arrows on the two towers furthest away from one another, they would twist this way and that to point in the direction Harry was now. Instead of twirling to point where Harry was now thought, the needles began to melt in place.

“What in the world!?” Albus shouted, leaping out of his chair and over his desk in a display of agility that would’ve caused many a gasp from his students. He quickly moved towards the two knickknacks, whipping out his wand, and casting several spells over them. Then his face paled, and he realized that this wasn’t the two devices finally deciding they were incompatible as he had long worried about.

With that he turned and thrust out his hand to a bird to one side. “Fawkes, come! We need to go and discover what has happened to young Harry!”

A second later in a flash of Phoenix fire, the two of them had appeared in the backyard of the Dursleys. Striding forward, he opened the door into the house, and moved forwards, his wand flashing out instantly. All three of the Dursleys, who had been watching TV, and had turned as he entered, froze. He then magically lifted Petunia into the air, and gestured with his wand, bringing her forward towards him over the sofa. “Where is Harry!?”

“G, Gh, he, he’s up in his room, if he’s not there I don’t know where he could be, or how he got, out the freak!” the horse-faced woman spluttered, trying to regain some measure of control.

“Take me to him right this moment!” he ordered, releasing the woman to thump to the ground, then made some sparks appear in front of her when she didn’t move, cursing and moaning about magical freaks. Warily she led the way up the stairs, looking as if she was afraid he would turn her to ash in an instant.

Albus’ eyes widened as he saw the cat flap on the door, and the amount of locks on it too, the thought honestly occurred to him*. I knew they would be strict with them, and I suspected they would be neglectful, but this level of caging him, that is beyond what I had thought he would face. I knew I should’ve used Legilimency on him when we met in the Inn!*

“Out of the way,” he said, pushing Petunia to one side. A single unlocking spell shattered all of the locks on the door, causing them to fall to the floor of the corridor. He pushed the door open rapidly, and looked inside scowling as he felt the miasma of magics within, all of which centered around a part of the bed, and an odd square thing set before a small kind of typewriter and what looked like a TV screen. “What has happened here!?”

**OOOOOOO**

The black around Harry soon faded as BG voice came back, its words drilling into his head. **“Nestled atop the cliffs that rise like a wall from the Sword Coast, Candlekeep is the largest and most comprehensive repository of knowledge in all Faerun. It is also a fortress of considerable might, one that has always held itself aloof from the goings on of the nations of the Sword Coast around it, and beyond. Life within is regimented, the monastic Order Of Keepers believing the preservation of the knowledge within is their greatest calling. To enter is nigh impossible unless one has access to tomes that those within have not seen yet. All save you and others like you, taken in while young by one of the Keepers as they go about Faerun.**

**The man who took you in as a babe in arms was named Gorion. For the last twenty years you have remained here, under his care and those of the Keepers who look after other foundlings like you, training, learning, preparing for adulthood, with Gorion your father figure, his tales of his wanderings a delight every night, with each one different, each one amazing. That time is soon to end however, as the moment to choose to become a Keeper or leave Candlekeep is coming on your 19th birthday.**

**Yet though that choice should be yours, Gorion has hinted it is not so, and the two of you will soon leave on an adventure. You are prepared for it, having spent almost as much time training in weapons-craft as you have in honing your mind and soul to battle evil as a Paladin, although you have yet to sit your holy vigil on either Helm or Tyr, the gods of Justice and Righteousness. But despite those preparations and indeed Gorion’s own well known magical and physical prowess, you have detected something almost like fear a time or two in his voice. Something has spooked your father, and you feel the walls of Candlekeep no longer protecting you, but rather enclosing you within, for good or ill you cannot say.”**

At the same time those words were going through his head, so too were some images, one after another appearing faster and faster. It wasn’t as if it was an entire life flashing before his eyes. That would’ve taken far too long. No, this was as if Harry was seeing a few highlights, things they could possibly be on a test or something afterwards.

A moment later, the darkness was ended, as someone shook Harry awake. “Wake up Hadrian! Wake up! You have slept over long today.”

Harry blinked up, and saw an elderly gentleman standing over him. He had the build of a man who looked as if he knew his way around a fight, wide shoulders, with a few scars here and there on his lower face and pieces of the neck that Harry could see, but also a pair of glasses perched on his face and an intelligent look to him, a staff waiting against the wall nearby. Above his head blinked a bright green notice box, reading “Name: Gorion. Status: family figure. Level: 28 mage, level 24 bard.

Connecting this man with his new characters background story, Harry blinked, rubbing at his eyes as he thought of a simple line to reply to this man as he got his bearings. “I’m sorry Gorion, for some reason, my sleeping schedule has been all off-kilter these days.”

“Bad dreams then? Well I suppose it’s to be expected Gorion said with a sigh patting Harry on the shoulder. “Yes, dreams like that are to be expected. Still, we’ll talk about them some other time, perhaps once we’re on the road. You know now with spring fully upon us my plan going forward is to leave soon. I fear that Candlekeep is no longer as safe for you, or for me.”

“Yes you’ve mentioned that plan before,” Harry said, remembering the introduction as he smiled slightly at the odd amount of care Gorion’s voice contained. Swinging his legs to one side he stretched, staring at his forearms, chest and legs now. While creating this character he hadn’t really been able to turn his head very well except when looking at the ‘screens’ or whatever they were. Because of that he hadn’t been able to look down at himself, so the muscles on his stomach and legs especially were entirely new to him. “Have you set a date when you want to leave?”

“Looking forward to finding a temple then?” Gorion said cocking an eyebrow at Harry.

Harry paused, thinking about it. He hadn’t been able to discover anything about the gods a Paladin could swear to during the character creation phase, and he didn’t have any idea which would suit him best. Or even what criterion to use. It was the *Lay on Hands*, the idea of being his own, albeit limited, healer which had grabbed his attention. That and all the other undead buffs.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “I think, I think that the God I should swear my sword to will, it will sort of come to me on the road you know,” he said lamely. It was the best he could think of at the time.

This actually seems to be the proper thing to say though Gorion nodded. “Good thinking. It’s never wise to force that kind of devotion. If you are truly called to the ways of a Paladin, a God will reach out for you and somehow guide your steps to one of his churches. If not, you could always fall back on being just another fighter. Although I am afraid it’s a little too late for you to become a mage.”

Gorion laughed at that, causing Harry to laugh. Gorion’s laugh was somewhat in infectious, deep and warm. And Harry honestly really liked the way Gorion was talking to him. *Is that because of the family relationship, or just because I’m an 18-year-old now rather than a 12-year-old? Whichever, it’s nice not to be treated as a child so much as a young man.*

At that point, Harry noticed that an orange box had suddenly appeared to one side, containing a message. “Optional quest: Before you can continue on the path of a Paladin, you need to decide what God to swear to. And here you stand, in Candlekeep, the world’s greatest library. Will you take this opportunity to research possible deities, or be a lazy ass! Rewards, 300 experience points,+1 to willpower.”

*Okay, so that means there are quests, that’s kind of awesome! So I can level up, change my stats maybe change my skill slots, and people here have designations determining their relationship to me, going by Gorion’s anyway. That I’ll have to research.* Standing up, Harry surreptitiously swiped a finger through the box where the accept button was, and the box disappeared.

“You’ve missed breakfast But you have just enough time to wash up, and shade for member, honestly a Paladin forgetting to shave his face, and with that long hair of yours!”,” Gorion said, smiling at Harry, and it was only now that Harry realized that besides having massive muscles and everything else, he was also tall now! He was able to look Gorion in the eye, and actually had to look down at him by a few inches. *This is going to take some getting used to.*

At his words, Harry blinked, ruffling one of his large hands through his hair. “You have a point there,” he said ruefully. *Maybe I didn’t think the long hair thing all the way through it it’s going to keep getting in my eyes like that.*

“Of course I have a point. I always have a point don’t you know?” Harry laughed at that, but Gorion went on quickly. “As I was saying, you have enough time to bathe and shave, before you have to meet the arms master for training. Although honestly at this point, I doubt the man has much to teach you.”

“There’s always something more to learn,” Harry said quickly, glancing to the side as another orange square appeared showing another Quest popped up. “Tutorial Quest: Although you have trained for much of your life, there is indeed always more to learn. Practice with the keeper of the gates, the master of arms of Candlekeep, to earn some experience points.”

This will quest didn’t have the ‘optional’ label, and there was no way for Harry to refuse. That was interesting*. So, some quests are mandatory.*

“Sound thinking,” Gorion said with a nod. “Oh, and Imoen was looking for you earlier. Something about you skirting your duties in the kitchen last night?”

Harry laughed, while inside he was panicking. *Um, unless, was that the little girl I saw a few times in those images after the introduction*? “Please, it was Imoen’s turn to help the cooks cleanup,” he said, wildly prevaricating. Since Harry actually liked to cook- considering most of the time it made the Dursleys leave him alone- he figured that would carry over. Cleaning up after the Dursleys though was a chore, and he figured his character might try to get out of that kind of thing.

“True,” Gorion said with a nod. “Imoen is much more interested in learning magical cantrips hers, and practicing with Mme. Barca rather than doing her chores. Although I remember a time when you were just as likely to shirk your chores as well.”

Harry shrugged that, not knowing the answer to that one, and Gorion laughed. “Well at any rate, come find me when you’re ready to begin our preparations to leave. We’ll need to buy supplies at that point, and make certain that our weapons are up to snuff. This is a dangerous time on the Sword Coast after all.”

*And if that isn’t a segue into a major quest later on I don’t know what is*, Harry thought to himself as he bade Gorion goodbye for the moment, and turned to look around him. He found himself in a small alcove-like room, with nothing but a slim dresser to one side consisting of only two drawers, on top of which was a few knickknacks, a knife, and a few coins. Harry picked up each thing in turn, seeing an information bar appear in midair over each.

The first told him that the coins were the local monetary denomination, and that he had five gold coins to his name. The dagger read simply as “small bronze dagger, fit to cut your meals or shave with, but you wouldn’t want to try anything more dangerous with it. Durability, two of twenty.” The other knickknacks were a small file, a wooden comb, and a bracelet. Each of these also had a durability rating, which was important to note.

He picked up the bracelet quizzically, looking at the information screen. “Common copper bracelet. Can be sold for money, or given as a gift. Girls like shiny things after all.”

Blinking Harry set it down again, shaking his head. Then he frowned in thought, looking around himself and wondering where he should go to bathe. Then a thought occurred to him. “Map?” he said aloud. At first nothing happened, then when Harry resignedly exited the room a small screen like object appeared in one corner of his eyes, showing a tiny image of the room he had just been in, and the corridor he now was standing in.

“Excellent he muttered to himself, “although obviously I’ll need to update it myself. That wasn’t entirely the case.” As Harry turned, he could look down the hallway in either direction and the map updated as he did.

Harry also saw little information screens in front of each doorway as he looked at them in turn. Looking at each one in turn caused them enlarge to the point where he could read them, adding the information therein to the map. In this manner he found out that he was in the lower dormitories, with each room on this floor being an alcove room like his own. At the far end however, was another information tag that said Communal Bath. Nodding happily, Harry moved in that direction.

Opening the door at the far end, Harry found themselves looking into a simple room with several basins set along the far wall, and flowing water coming in from another area that gently steamed. Above that was a window leading outside with small bars on it, and Harry could hear the crackle of a fire, indicating the water wasn’t naturally warm.

Regardless of that, Harry moved over to a silver bright standing mirror, to look at himself thoughtfully. This was indeed the build he’d made, but actually being in this body was going to take a lot of getting used to. He held up one of his hands, which was at least twice the size of the hand he was normally used here and clenched it, then punched out experimentally. He did this a few times, then squatted down, then stood back up. Then remembering a few exercises he had seen Oliver force Fred and George to do, he dropped to the floor of the bath area and performed 20 quick push-ups before hopping to his feet, not even winded.

*Wicked!* He thought to himself, posing in the mirror. A noise behind him caused him to turn quickly, coming out of his pose look at the doorway, but thankfully it had just been the sound of the wind. Sheepishly, Harry moved over to the heated water, and filled in the nearby bucket, moving over to one of the numerous body -sized basins, filling it with water quickly.

With that done, Harry stripped out of his shirt, taking a moment to look at his muscles again, poking at the six pack he had. *That’s cool! But I wonder, can… if I have this body definition now, this I mean I can use it?* Thinking about that, he nodded. *That makes a lot of sense.*

At that he paused, looking around, and then shrugged. *I suppose the easy time of getting bonus points to intelligence or wisdom is gone then. Well whatever, it gave me enough of a leg up already. Although the fact I had 2 for wisdom back in my original body is just wrong.*

With that, he began to strip off his pants, leather like he had been wearing during the creation process, only to blink and look down at himself. “…I mean, I knew that I was larger down there than I had been before, but what’s with all the hair? Do guys really grow that down there too? Weird.” He experimentally reached down and played with the hair there, and then measured his large hand against his penis, blinking. “Meh, I guess it’s proportionate to the rest of me now.”

Shaking off the thought as unimportant, Harry lifted a leg, then settled into the bath for a moment, sinking in quickly and dunking his head. Pulling back out, he moved his hands up his face, wiping away the water then into his hair, only to pause as he felt something on his face. He quickly patted it, wiping away the water, and then blinked. “Seriously? I do have to shave! I thought Gorion wasn’t being serious about that, or does that mean I can change my appearance? That makes sense I suppose, but how am I supposed to shave?” Harry remembered the dagger back in his room, and sighed. He hadn’t brought it with him and for a moment, he debated getting out and going to get it.

Just then though, the door to the bath house opened, and a young woman entered. She was possibly around the age of a seventh year just like Harry’s new body, with long blonde hair down to her shoulders in bouncy curls something like a Hufflepuff girl he’d seen once, though the color was closer to Lavender’s.

She also had a large chest, which for some reason Harry’s eyes gravitated towards before he could pull them away, and she was dressed in a kind of bar maid outfit or something similar. *Oh right, Middle Ages, not a lot of variety in dress at this point for most people.*

The girl looked at him, and smirked. As she did, Harry noticed an information box above her head. “Name: Cassandra, Occupation: a barmaid at the end of Candlekeep. Status towards you: very friendly.” Harry wondered about why it said occupation instead of class, but that wasn’t the oddest thing. That honor belonged to her status bar, which was pink.

“Oh sorry,” Cassandra said with something in her tone, that made Harry start blushing for some reason. “I didn’t know you were in here Harry. Do you need any… help?” she asked, saying the word in such a way that Harry’s blush became even redder and it sent a tingle down Harry’s spine, although he didn’t know why.

He coughed, looking away, and said “I, well yes,” he said, his voice thankfully not coming out in squeak as he had feared. “I seem to have left my razor in my room.”

The girls lips twitched, and she nodded. “I’ll get it for you. But then all want something from you?”

“And what would that be?” Harry asked warily, still looking away.

She shook her head with a laugh. “Just because your training to be a paladin doesn’t mean you are one yet, you don’t have to look away from me like that you know. Even Paladins can at least look at girls.”

“Yes, well, you’re a little distracting,” Harry said, which was the truth, although he honestly didn’t know why. *I’m looking at her like I’ve seen…*

Blinking, Harry would have slapped himself in the forehead if he was alone as he realized*. Oh my God, I’m older now, I am looking at her like some of the older guys look at Angelina!* Angelina, it was wildly believed, was the hottest of the three Flying Foxes and though only a third year, she had quite a lot of the older boys pining after her. Not that she gave any of them the time of day, being far more interested in flying than anything else.

Harry understood that she was pretty, and understood what pretty was. But before this, that had simply been an abstract sort of understanding. He liked to look at Angelina like someone would like to look at a painting. But looking at Cassandra now, that was causing him all sorts of new and unusual feelings. And below in the water, Harry’s penis was beginning to stir for some reason. *What the heck!?*

“That was nice,” Cassandra enthused. “Heartfelt, and unplanned. Talk like that will get you everywhere! I’ll be right back. But I’ll still want something in return.”

Two information boxes, one a status box and the other a quest box, appeared to the side as Cassandra left. Throbbing red like the information box over Cassandra it read, “Congratulations, you have earned +1 to your relationship with Cassandra the barmaid! Continue to build up your relationship point if you want to pursue more than friendship with Cassandra.”

“Wait, this game will give me points and status updates about my relationships with people around me?! Oh that is so wicked! If I ever get out of here, I have to think of a way to bring that with me! It’d make people so much easier to understand!” Harry enthused.

As Harry clicked out of that one, he read the next, which was another optional quest but this one just confused him. “The birds and the bees: Due to your **appalling** lack of knowledge before becoming the gamer, you should probably look into more things than you previously thought you should here in Candlekeep. Discover what boys and girls do together. Reward: +1000 experience, +1 to charisma, +1 to wisdom. Regular relationships with the opposite sex, (you are interested in girls aren’t you?) become available. Penalties for not accepting include -3 to charisma, -4 to wisdom. You will no longer be able to form a regular relationship with a girl.

“What, what’s more than friendship with a girl?” Harry mused aloud, one hand moving up to touch his scar on his four head thoughtfully. Still, this was an obvious choice, and he clicked accept.

The door opened at that point, and Cassandra returned. She boldly strode across the bathing room towards Harry, who quickly covered himself as best he could. *What the heck!? The girls on the Quidditch team never bathed with the guys! And why is she looking at me as if she wants to eat me?!*

A status screen popped up to one side, but Harry ignored it as Cassandra had reached him now and stood over the basin, staring down into it, and smiling beguilingly down at him. “Here’s your razor,” she said, handing him the knife while leaning over him unnecessarily. Harry blinked but couldn’t look away fast enough to not see down her blouse, to the large ripe…

Below his hand, Harry found his penis slowly stiffening, and he looked away quickly. “Thank you Cassandra, but I need to get shaving,” He said, quickly coming up with an excuse to get Cassandra out of there. “I have a meeting with the Master At arms soon.”

Cassandra laughed. “That’s a pity. I could have given you a whole new definition for the word ‘education’, Harry.” She then shrugged. “Anyway, what I want your help with, is to deliver some wood to the inn. Winthrop threw out his back this morning, and he can’t move the poor man. We’ll need some for the cooking fires.”

“Done,” Harry said with a nod, as another optional quest screen appeared then disappeared as he accepted it. *Okay, so I can also accept verbally if someone is actually giving me the quest rather than the world around me. That’s good to know*.

Then with a final look at Harry from head to toe, Cassandra smiled. “I’ll see you when you drop it off then.” With that she turned, swaying her hips in such a way that Harry could only stare like someone hypnotized by a cobra.

“That was, that was weird!” He looked down at himself, removing his hands to stare at his penis, and scowled. “And so were you! What the heck, you’re not supposed to get all stiff like that. …Are you?”

There was another ding and Harry finally looked up to see that his interaction with Cassandra had accumulated three more status change boxes. The first one was once more the same sort of throbbing red color as the first one about Cassandra. Congratulations, you have earned +1 to your relationship with Cassandra. She is now interested. A step beyond teasing, this relationship entails that the girl with this designation might be interested in you in more than a flirtatious manner, though physical or emotional is unknown at this time.

“That is… okay, I guess?” Harry said with a frown, before turning to the other two status box changes. Thick as a Brick! Because of your appalling lack of knowledge of inter-people relationships, you have lost wisdom points. -2 to wisdom. The next one read the same thing, with only -1 to wisdom.

“Ouch, alright fine! I will go research this birds and bees nonsense first,” Harry groused, then looked down at the razor in his hand. “…But how exactly am I supposed to do this again?”

Harry’s first attempt at shaving himself did not go very well, but once he was finished nicking himself, Harry learned three things. One, his health bar would appear if he was injured, two, there was actual pain in this game, and three, shaving was damn difficult.

He stared at the little screen that it popped up, thinking about the implications of it. The screen said “you have cut yourself shaving. Perhaps next time, you should think about this thing called on mirror. -1 to health.” The red health bar had appeared like one of the other games boxes above his right arm, hovering there rather unobtrusively in comparison to the other boxes. Since Harry still wasn’t certain if other people could see them or would notice him interacting with them this was a good idea. The bar showed 99 out of 100, however as he was watching, it began to slowly fill itself.

That was a good thing to now, although he doubted it would carry over to actual injuries rather than self-inflicted ones like this. *No way am I lucky. Although, it could just be the fact it’s only nicks and scratches…* With that in mind, Harry turned to the wall, his fist flashing out.

“Crunch! You have hit the wall of castle keep, why did you do that again? -4 to health.”

“Three, really?” Harry groused, wincing and rubbing his wrist and knuckles. “Okay, so pain is real in this game, that’s as an important thing to know in the future.”

Thinking hard, Harry wondered what he should do first then decided that the impact to his wisdom was too great to ignore after talking to Cassandra so went with the plan he’d made after she had left: he went in search of the library. Since this place was called the greatest library in the world, he figured that would be easy. And it was thankfully.

Harry found the library began on the level directly above where he was his room had been. However, finding a series of books to help him about birds and bees, whatever they had to do with girls, was a little more difficult. He couldn’t just out right ask for help. Considering the snark he had been getting from the pop-ups about this topic, he figured this was the sort of thing that a person who was his physical body’s age would probably already know, and he didn’t want to bring more attention to himself than necessary. So he just wandered the halls of the library, which put the library of Hogwarts to shame.

It was **huge**! The interior of this library was at least as long as a Quidditch stadium, the main room maybe as tall as the seating for one and it also sprawled throughout the keep, spreading into wings, small alcoves and little nooks and crannies, all of them lined with books. Wherever there could be were stacks in between the walls varying in size, all of them rising straight up to the ceiling. The books all looked well cared for, put away correctly, their linings almost glowing with good health despite the fact most of them looked older than Harry could possibly guess.

*Hermine would love this place!* He thought to himself with amusement, coming out of one small alcove he’d found almost upon entering the library. *When I’m done with this whole birds and the bees nonsense, I might have to look into just reading for a time here. After all, this is tutorial portion of this game. Until I’m ready to actually leave the keep, will time even matter?* At that thought Harry paused, then clicked his fingers. It looked as if the time of easy intelligence or wisdom bonuses was indeed over and with a sigh, he moved deeper into the library.

However, just because he wasn’t earning more intelligence or wisdom points didn’t mean he wasn’t learning things. Because as he went, he saw other people within the library and he immediately noticed something different about their stats in comparison to the one he had seen over Gorion and Cassandra’s. Gorion’s had been a bright green, Cassandra’s that odd red pulsing color. The people he was seeing around him had yellow notifications, and when he clicked on them, he saw. “Keeper Tassin. No relationship possible.”

He heard them talking, quietly going about their business in the library, so he figured that these people were technically speaking real, it was just that they couldn’t have an impact on him or his life/game. Harry wondered if he should experiment with it. He walked up to one of them and said “Excuse me, but could you point me in the direction of books about the gods?” *After all* Harry reasoned*, I’m supposed to be researching them to aren’t I?*

The man looked at him for a moment from under his cowl, then shook his head wryly. “Nigh on sixteen years you’ve been here and you still don’t know where all the books are? No wonder Gorion is thinking of taking you away. You would never make a good Keeper. The books about God’s are on the 13th shell, all of it, up on the fourth floor, right wing. If you’re looking for specifics, I’m certain you can work that out on your own.”

Harry nodded, and backed away, looking around for any status screens from the conversation and found one directly behind the man*. I wonder if I can set where those things appear*. He moved to that screen, touching it with his hand and moving it to hang up higher in the air, and then moved over to another Keep, asking the same question. When he did, the same status screen popped up in the new position behind the older one. *Good! I’m learning.*

He asked that man the same question, and got something of the same response, but just enough of a difference to make it seem as if this person was in point of fact an individual rather than a cut out cuddy cutting board character. He walked away from the both, then enlarged the screen, reading it slowly. “You have talked to a Neutral civilian: These characters can have little to no direct impact on your game or your life. They are their own people, and should be treated as such. Just because they’re not important to you, does not mean they’re not important to one another. Be wary of how you treat them, and always follow the Golden rule, which as a paladin you should already know.”

Harry chuckled at that then said it aloud. “Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.” *I wonder if that would have changed if I had chosen another type of class.* With that bit of his interest allayed at the moment, Harry closed both of those windows, then began to move through the library, always keeping in mind the number of the area where the gods could be found. *I wonder if they have children’s books.*

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“Well, what do you think?” Albus asked, looking over at the other two old men who were standing across from him in Harry’s bedroom. For the moment he ignored the former student who one of them had brought along. Since the young woman’s hair was shifting in a riot of colors as she moved around the room examining things, this was not as easy as it sounded.

The old man who had brought this former student had a wildly moving magical eye, and a stump for a leg. He had been poking and prodding at literally everything in the room with his companion, his body tense and wary. He, like the girl, wore red robes, though the young woman’s was freshly pressed and marked with a yellow shoulder pad. The old man’s robes were drab, aged, dirty and patched.

He was the one who spoke up first glaring up at Dumbledore. “Well, besides the various evidence of if not outright abuse, then certain neglect, I can’t see any kind of sign of foul play here.” He waited fro Albus to respond to that as the young woman looked in their direction, her whole face flashing red in fury for a moment.

But Albus said nothing, and after a moment the man with the wild eye sighed and went on. “There’s a lot of magical miasma in the air, so much so I can barely see through it at all, but like I said, no sign of foul play or foreign magics that I can detect. What happened here was either item related, a long term enchantment, or…”

“Or…” the old other old man supplied, scratching at his chin thoughtfully as he stared down at the computer that had been by the bed. He had recognized it for a computer but had not spoken up yet, and was interested in hearing his comrade’s opinion before he did.

“Or house-elf related. Their magic is a bugger to spot at the best of times, and whoever used it here took pains to not leave any traces. With that, and the rest of the magic that occurred here, it’s a wonder I’m able to get any hint at all.”

The second old man nodded thoughtfully. “That dovetails with what I have discovered. I am detecting a lot of magic around this computer here, so much so that I’m wondering if Harry somehow discovered an enchanted computer that someone else had created as part of a trap or some-such. I really have no idea how magic would react to a computer, a device made to, in some small fashion, think for itself. At least that is how I understand such things. I do not know enough about them.”

“Whatever it is, it ran on magic, not electricity,” the girl said speaking up for the first time. All three of the others looked at her in surprise, and she shrugged. “Look, I know I’m knew to this whole magical detection business, that’s the reason why I’m with old Mad-Eye there,” she said jerking a thumb towards the old man with the magical eye and the obvious label. “But I know a bit about Muggle technology. That computer should be connected to the wall over there,” she went on, pointing to a wall socket. “It isn’t, and I’d say that means it was running on magic right? And it’s off now.”

“That could well be true yes,” the as yet-introduced third man said with a nod. “I’m getting a lot of gobbledygook here honestly, Albus, Alastor.” He confessed. “There was so many various magics and work on this computer it’s a wonder that anything happened at all. But something did and I’d wager that what happened here was completely accidental, or simply well beyond what anyone could anticipate. There are just too many odd signatures all mixed up together for it to be anything but an accident. A horrible confused accident. Which alas will make it all the harder to figure out what did, in fact, happen.”

“Indeed, Algernon. I had not detected the house elf magic, but I was able to pull out Harry’s signature some Norse too, something well beyond what Harry would be able to perform. I believe you are correct, Harry found a magically enchanted computer and being young and ignorant, attempted to repair and use it. Something happened, and he was teleported elsewhere.” Albus said musingly. “The question then is how to find him and bring him back.

While the young girl mumbled something about the three of them being the A-team for some reason, Algernon shook his head. “There was another signal there, but as an Unspeakable, I’m afraid I can’t share the nature of it with either of you.”

Albus winced at that, knowing the number of magical vows all the Unspeakables operated under. A secret part of the magical government, the Unspeakables operated in shadows and obscurity, their job being to keep certain dangerous magics under wraps, to destroy old magics which were too dark or powerful to allow to continue to exist and making certain that other secrets, some magical, some not, never saw the light of day. Albus had worked with Alergnon Croaker on many jobs before, and new however there were levels of secrecy to his job. “Is this something you need to investigate, or destroy as soon as possible?”

“Destroy,” Croaker replied coldly. “Every example of this kind of magic is supposed to be found and destroyed by my department. I’ve dealt with only one before this in my lifetime but any Unspeakable is Oath bound to destroy it.” His teeth bared slightly. “I can put that off for a time, use the fact it is part of an ongoing missing persons investigation, but I will need to first try to trace Harry’s steps so we can find out where he found this computer. If there was one, there could be others.”

“Agreed. We need to trace Harry’s movements, question those three creatures downstairs,” Mad Eye said authoritatively. “And find out how a house elf is involved in this.”

“So that’s it, we just take the computer and question the locals, nothing else? What are we doing to find where Harry was sent?” the young woman asked looking angry.

“Why do you care Tonks?” Alastor asked. “I’ve told you, investigations like this demand some objectivity. We won’t find anything if we go harrying off.”

The girl with the odd colorful eye blinked, then seems to shrink in on herself. “He, he’s my cousin,” she muttered. “My Grand-mum Dorea married his grandfather.” Inside the young woman

“Regardless, I need to take custody of that computer now. I’ll have it down in my office, you can both come and examine it there, but I need to take command of it at once, my oaths demand it.” Croaker said commandingly. “And I’m sorry to say this Albus, but I need to be more concerned about where that specific bit of magic came from than where Harry is now. You two and young Miss Tonks will have to handle that side of the investigation without me.”

Tsking, Mad-eye nodded as did Albus. “I’d rather be involved on that end of things to meself, but finding Potter alive takes priority.”

“Indeed. I will endeavor to trace the magic of the house elf, perhaps one of the house elves at Hogwarts could help me with that. Alastor, would you and Miss Tonks question the Dursleys for us. I believe Petunia in particular would be of help in this. I understand she spends most of her time at home.” Albus said, pulling out a small vial. It looked like glass, or quartz, and he held it over the computer.

Algernon tensed, but Albus simply waved him off, muttering an incantation and waving his wand in his other hand. There was a faint ping, and the air around the computer slowly changed color to a light coppery color, flowing into the vial. The color seemed to calm Croaker down, though why Tonks couldn’t figure out, watching this avidly.

“There, that gives me enough of a sample. I believe we should meet in Algernon’s office tonight to discuss our findings. Until then.”

With that Albus disappeared, apparating out in the neatest, smoothest apparition Tonks had seen this side of a house elf. *Damn me we do tend to take them for granted, don’t we? House elves are a lot more powerful and versatile than we ever give them credit for.*

Algernon hefted the computer up one piece over the other, stuffing them into a large mokeskin pouch before nodding over at Alastor. “Until then Moody, oh, and you might want to check in with me in a few hours. If I find where this computer came from, well, I doubt you’d want to miss the fireworks.”

Mad-eye cackled at that, and led Tonks out the door. She however paused, staring around the room, her face guilty, before she shook it off and followed her mentor out the door.

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Harry spent the rest of that day in the library, trying to discover more about birds and bees for some reason that eluded him until he actually did so. Luckily for Harry, the greatest library in the known world did indeed, have the some books designed to aid in teaching children. Despite his new body and looks, Harry was after all, mentally speaking still something of a 12-year-old. A mature 12-year-old in many ways, but also one that didn’t really get out much or had anything in the way of adult role models.

Harry finally found some books that were on the topic that he had been told to research in no uncertain terms. It was labeled *Girls, Boys, the Differences Between Them, and Why They Matter*. It came with cutouts, and that was enough to cause Harry some nightmares that night when he retreated to his room, his eyes wide and unseeing, only the skill Gamer’s Mind keeping him from going completely barmy. Or Harry thought of them as nightmares. He woke up with his penis hard, memories of the girl Cassandra in his head and his head so aflame Gorion asked if he was feeling sick.

As Harry had speculated would occur, his next morning started the same exact way, sort of. Gorion came and waking him up with a head on his shoulder, and mentioned the same thing as he had the day before. The wording was different however thanks to Harry’s flaming face, and that was enough to tell Harry that even if he was stuck in a kind of time loop during this tutorial phase, the people within it were still people, not caricatures. Harry had to respect that.

That morning, Harry practiced shaving himself again rather than simply getting into the bath, this time using a small mirror and then headed back to the library, his face as grim as someone heading to the gallows. He still had that hit to his wisdom he had to get over, no matter how embarrassing. The wisdom stat was just too damn important to his overall mental abilities to ignore.

Over the course of the next three loop days as Harry thought of them, Harry figured out exactly what the birds and the bees had to do with girls and boys, what all the mechanics were and everything else he could from that book. The cutouts still gave him issues each night, and Harry was honestly mortified in a lot of ways by them.

But that didn’t stop his body for reacting. Whenever he saw a pretty girl, and there were several here in Candlekeep, his body would react. His eyes would stray where they shouldn’t, and his mind would start to wonder and his body reacted. Controlling that reaction took several more loop days, but eventually, Harry learned enough to at least get back some of the wisdom points he had lost during that brief interaction with Cassandra. He had gone from that book to others about courtship and other things, even reading a romance from cover to cover, but most of it just didn’t make much sense to him.

From there he’d spent a few days trying different ways to greet Cassandra, ranging from smiling at her and joking around, being embarrassed (he’d done this one several times, albeit unintentionally…) and twice going even further. Feeling very daring, indeed feeling very cocky overall thanks to his new body, he had invited her to join him in the bath, and gotten his first kiss for his troubles.

After Cassandra had reluctantly left after that, Harry saw the notification that he had completed the quest.

You have discovered what every little boy entering his manhood should learn, if more from books than from people as is normal. +1000 experience, +3 to your wisdom.

Bonus! You have gone beyond reading, both flirting with girls and trying to control yourself around them. Due to your ability to control your wandering eyes, You get +1 to willpower.

Due to flirting successfully with the Barmaid, you get +1 to charisma. Don’t get cocky about that last one though, there are reasons why barmaids are known as easy after all.

Harry groused to himself that the game really was a snarky SOB, but put that to one side for now. The bonus to willpower was nice after all and he guessed the charisma was also nice. “But besides kissing, and I suppose other stuff, being nice, I’m not arguing that they would be, what’s the point about relationships in this game?”

Looking around the castle figuratively, Harry frowned in thought wondering what else he should do. “So long as I’m stuck here in this tutorial I should try my best to better myself in as many ways as possible. It doesn’t seem as if I’ll be forced to leave anytime soon after all, best to use that loophole in the game right?”

With that in mind, Harry asked the nearest Keeper for a paper an ink, having gotten used to the lack of pens and pencils easily thanks to his time at Hogwarts. Indeed, besides his ongoing body issues – Harry would swear a certain part of him had a mind of its own – and his still needing to get used to being unable to slip into the background, Harry had rather gotten used to his time here in this new world. Part of that of course was his Gamer’s Mind skill. But part of it was the fact the people here were nice and Gorion was just great. He and Harry had every meal together and spent that time talking and laughing, with Gorion telling Harry of his adventures and Harry of the books he had read that day or what else he had been up to, bar his flirting and that kind of thing of course.

The only two things he actually hadn’t gotten used to was his hair, and the food. Harry had cut his hair in the mirror at one point, but it had grown back the next loop day, which irritated him. Harry figured he would have to wait until he was out of this tutorial to make any permanent change to himself. But the food was just poor, there was no other way to put it. The bread was decent, if very plain, butter was butter, but there weren’t nearly as much variety or spices, not even as much salt, as Harry was used to at Hogwarts. Even compared to the food he got from the Dursleys it was kind of poor in taste, though it made up for that with amount.

With his paper and quill Harry made a list of things he wanted to research, things he had to know, and things he wanted to do. *Hermione was right, making a list makes things a lot easier to manage. I still don’t think you need to make time on a daily schedule to visit the privy though, I’ll still side with Ron on that one,* Harry thought, with some amusement as he looked down at the list he had compiled.

1. Figure out more about the game, its controls and everything else about it I can. Experiment and see how people react to the Game bits.
2. Figure out the connection between magic from my own world and this one.
3. Continue to build up my knowledge of the world of Tyril.
4. Research the gods I am supposed to swear to, and figure out what that might mean.
5. Create a war chest or something? I don’t think the gold I have will be enough. Build up some weapons too.
6. Built up my skills and stats if at all possible, including my general level.

Looking at his list, Harry was well-satisfied. He even thought that he had gotten the priority right. The game, its controls and the abilities it gave him seemed like they could be very important in the long run. He had already learned that people like Gorion had some of the abilities his Gamer ability gave to him, but not to the degree. Gorion talked about spell levels, learned abilities and levels, but didn’t seem to know about the ability to upgrade his stats consciously, and Harry wasn’t certain that Gorion’s talk about levels were the same thing as his own. He also didn’t have the item box, something Harry had discovered the same loop day he’d found the first book on sex. Gorion wasn’t able to see the screens Harry could either, but Harry wasn’t certain that meant he couldn’t consciously interact with things pertaining to his own levels and skills.

However, Harry had also learned things about his ability to read people’s information. If the person was too high a level in comparison to his own Harry wouldn’t get any information from him, instead the information screen would just be blank save for the name and sometimes the class. There were four people like that in Candlekeep, all four of them senior Keepers, two of them the leader of the keep and his second-in-command. And Harry could see a lot of information about those who had less levels than he did, save for the citizens, who didn’t seem to have much in the way of information.

Putting the note in his Item Box, Harry stood up and heading deeper into the library, smirking suddenly. *Huh, that could be an interesting experiment too, see if something I put in my Item box remains in there when a loop day restarts.*

With that the first time on his list in mind, Harry wandered in the library, using trying to figure out books that would help him in the long run. He found several, which fell into two categories. One was lore-based, books that taught him about the world in general, history and stuff like that, taking care of number three on his list. Through this he learned a lot about the geography of the world, the Sword Coast, Candlekeep’s neighbors, a general overview of the history of the area and the gods in general. He even learned about the Time of Troubles and how it began, and the fact it had ended while his new body must have been a toddler.

Those were interesting, but Harry actually had to physically read through, which made them very different from the other types of books he found and time consuming. Harry spent half the day with them, the other half doing other research or small tutorial quests. Those quests stopped giving him any experience quickly, but they helped in other ways.

One way he spent this time was to train with the Master of Arms, and here he learned possibly the most important things he ever learned during this loop time. First, combat was very hard, and second, it wasn’t anything he had thought it would be like.

“So Gorion says he thinks I’ve got naught more to teach you lad,” The Master of Arms, a man named Jondalar said, tossing a staff over to Harry. “Well, let’s see about that aye. Have at you!”

Harry caught the staff and fumbled with it for a second but was still able to get the staff between him and his attacker. He took a step back then was forced to defend himself again and again. His arms didn’t move on their own, as his legs had during the character creation process, but Harry was somehow able to see how Jondalar was attacking, and could then block him more easily. This was a major aid, but there didn’t seem to be anything game-related for a time, and Harry took two hard hits with the staff, causing im to grunt in pain. No stranger to pain in his old life, these hits still hurt like blazes.

Then Jondalar stepped back, signaling the end of the bout. “Hah, well your base reflexes and strength are good enough, now let’s switch to sword and shield and see what happens aye?”

Harry followed the man over to a weapon’s rack and took both a shield and a sword down, hefting effortlessly, something that still, after more than a month in this world, still surprised him. Both were practice weapons with low durability and high weight, but he could still use them easily. He turned and blocked the next attack Jondalar launched at him, even as he read off a status box above the fight.

“You have equipped a shield and weapon Combo. Since you have skill points in this ability, you will see a buff to your defense and overall speed while you have a shield and weapon equipped.” Behind that was another one. “You have equipped a sword. Since you have skill points spent on this weapon, you will see a buff to your offensive abilities while wielding it. Find magical weapons or armor to add more to your speed and striking power.”

To Harry, it seemed as if Jondalar was now moving in slow motion, and he almost negligently blocked the man’s next blow. He dodged backwards from a slash that snaked in over his shield, then somehow knew he should bash forward with the shield. This caught Jondalar in the chest, forcing him backward with a grunt of displaced air. Harry’s sword then flashed out before the other man could recovered and smashed into the older man’s chest sending him sprawling. He rolled on the ground and came back in, but it was obvious to Harry now that the skill slots were hugely important, helping him by giving him instincts he wouldn’t otherwise have as well as adding to his base strength and speed when

Then he discovered something else as he raised the blade and went on the attack once more. A red mark of some kind appeared in his vision and Harry instinctively aimed for it, where it lay on the side of

A small screen popped up then “Follow the bouncing red dot! Thanks to your two skill points with a sword when engaged in combat and using a sword you can see an aiming point and aim for it. Hitting that point will allow you to land a critical hit. Warning, your chance to hit is based on your dexterity, familiarity with your weapon, luck and of course your enemy. Remember, the enemy always gets a vote too!”

Harry attempted to hit that point but found his sword blocked. Moving his shield instinctively Harry stepped back and blocked Jondalar’s riposte, and the two continued. Harry would then come back to train like this every third loop day. He didn’t gain any experience for it beyond the first day, but the training with his new body and abilities was invaluable.

But even with what he learned from Jondalar and the other two mini-quests that taught him about combat if he hat to categorize it, that information took third place to Harry’s personal investigations and what Harry found out via the second type of book: Information Books. When Harry picked the first one of these he found up, a bright green box appeared in his line of vision over it.

He dropped the book in surprise not having seen that occur before, catching it right before could it hit the ground. *Seeker reflexes, gotta like them*! Holding the book up again, he looked at the title, reading it aloud. “Relationships and you: forming parties, forming romantic entanglements, friendships, and how they impact your abilities.”

“You have found an information book!” The information slot said. “To read, simply press accept. A certain amount of time will pass, and the information will now be available to you simply inputting itself into your brain. Note, there are six information books in all in this tutorial section. Can you find them all? Bonus 400 experience points.”

Harry grinned at that, and hit accept. The book burst into flame and Harry stared around in horror, anticipating literally everyone else in the keep attacking him for destroying one of their precious books. But nothing happened, and he breathed a sigh of relief. *Huh, I guess those kidns of books only appear for me then?*

Setting that to one side, Harry closed his eyes, and suddenly he just knew things. He knew about the levels of relationships, as well as the types. And how they tied into his intelligence and wisdom. Relationships directly impacted how people interacted with you. If you were friends with a merchant for example they would give you better deals. If you were friends with another adventurer like Gorion, you could invite them to form parties. The higher the friendship level, the better you worked together, up to and including creating group tactics, team attacks, even magically aided attacks.

All of that was interesting, but what surprised Harry the most was that forming relationships with women could also give permanent benefits or penalties. Some of them were kind of self-explanatory. The book told Harry that he would earning a slight bonus to charisma and wisdom the first time he formed a relationship with a woman. If he formed a purely physical relationship, which was what Cassandra had been hinting at, he would get a bonus point to Constitution.

But the book hinted at more: hidden abilities, skills, and bonuses to his basic stats than that if you had a relationship with another adventurer. It also warned about negative effects if such a thing occurred and the relationship failed for whatever reason. That was good, that could be really good. Harry was very pleased with his new knowledge, and what it meant in the long term.

“So I should look for friendships at the very least, and even romantic stuff can give me bonuses both in the long and short term. Weird, but certainly helpful. Still, I’m not happy about the moral side of things there. Although, I suppose if we both go into the relationship knowing that we aren’t interested in more it would be fine, right?” Harry mused, shaking his head as he tried and succeeded in stopping his body from reacting at the memory of her kiss or the view down her dress she’d given him.

It had to be said that Harry dismissed the idea of taking a loop-day to create a relationship with someone else, like one of the young Chanters who served the keep or the visiting mage Phyldia, who he had met on a small side-quest. There were a few chanters who were the light pink of ‘interested in you*’* and Phyldia reached that point once when he took her side quest, although Harry had no idea what he’d done to get that reaction.

After all, he could enter the relationship, get the stat bonuses, and then the next day not be committed to anything since he was the only one who remembered anything after a loop day ended. But that would be wrong, toying with someone’s feelings like that, even if they would never remember it.

The next three books were not nearly as helpful They went over information he had already figured out for himself during the current character creation process; what restrictions were, weapon combos, and suchlike, the Item box, and more along those lines, although they did mention that Harry was the only person who could see most of the information he did. The next one he found though was very helpful indeed. It gave him the information to be able to change some of what the game called the ‘interaction grid’. This meant how he saw the map, what information was shown, how to control where the information boxes showed up by type, how to create a journal that he could access mentally, how to create what was called a quick slot, which was extremely helpful for his day to day movement about Candlekeep.

The last however was even more helpful. It was labeled “*Magic in the world of Faerun.*”

When Harry gleefully clicked on it, the book burst into flame, causing him to once more look around quickly. AN instant later he stopped worrying about death by lynch mob, because now Harry knew how magic worked in this world.

Mages started in something like the same way as wizards did back in his own world. They would learn spells that other people had created, writing them down in spell books and memorizing their words using words, gesture and a wand or staff to create the effect. Magic in this world were also much more versatile as it was for only the best wizards back home, allowing some wizards to create their own spells or small cantrips to create changes to the local environment. The one area though where Harry’s world was better than this one was in transfiguration and conjuration. Here both of those were incredibly difficult magical schools to learn and power intensive to boot. Back home, that was certainly not the case.

Eventually as they grew in power and skill, the only really limitation was how many spells per day they could wield, gestures and words falling by the wayside followed then by foci. But that limitation was a hard line dependent on level, and they always, **always** had to write them down in their book. They could eventually disdained a foci, though many staffs or other items existed that could help a wizard with spellcasting in various ways. A wizard could even learn how to create his own staff and add magic to it as he wished, including spells set to automatically activate under certain conditions.

All spells had a duration time, whereas powerful enchantments did not. Enchantments were the work of extremely powerful mages working alone or in groups. They could imbued into items to create long term effects such as adding to a weapon’s hitting power or durability, or imbued into an area to create a bubble of influence or some such.

It was very interesting, but none of it told Harry the one thing he wants to know above all else at this point. How the spells from his own world carried over into this one. But it did tell him to things he needed to know to start: a mage needed a focus to start, and apparently needed to write down the spells.

“All right,” he said to himself, “it’s time for some more experimentation.”

With that, Harry observed the people around him, seeing which of the keepers were mages, and how they treated their staffs. Eventually, he found one, an elderly woman of Phyldia’s acquaintance who was very forgetful about where she placed her staff. Once he spotted her leaving it in one of the alcoves, he snatched it up and hid it in his room until after the evening meal, which was a time he knew the dorms were largely empty and no one was looking for him.

Staff in hand, Harry returned to his own room, and began to go through the gestures of one of the few spells that he had memorized beyond all others: Reparo. Using his body’s strength, he bent a coin out of shape, nearly in half in fact, then pointed the staff at it, and intoned “Reparo!”

There was a moment of nothing, and then a flare of yellow light from the staff. Harry felt drained and in pain for some reason, but the coin was once more pristine.

A instant later as he was still contemplating this latest development, a massive notification square appeared in front of him. “Congratulations, you have cheated like a bitch! Because of your unique otherworldly status as a wizard where you came from, you have discovered the ability to use the spells from your own world in this one. Don’t get cocky though, because with each spell cast, your lifepoints will takes a hit! New status added, Mage of the Blood.”

Harry frowned once more wondering about the level of lip the game occasionally gave him, but decided to leave it to be for the moment. He opened his status board, and looked at it closely, clicking on the new addition noticing that the two that had been blocked out were still there. This was an entirely new ability blood-based ability. Harry clicked on it and saw the information within.

**Mage of the Blood**: Due to special circumstances you have discovered you can use the spells of your original world here in the game. However, this comes at a cost to not only your mana, but your very life.

Restrictions: you can no longer dual-class as a mage. Spells from your old world can only be used a limited number of time per day, the number of times to be determined by your level. The number of different spells you can retain per day is also dependent on your level.

“Wicked!” However, Harry knew that this was of limited utility. After all, he didn’t know that many spells, and he doubted anyone in this world would be very affected by, say a tickling charm. Although the immobilization spell was one that he definitely could see being of use, just like the Stupefy spell.

Harry didn’t need to write the spells into a spell book, but there was a certain definite limit to how many use per day. Like with his quick slots, Harry basically hung the spells to one side of his mind and then could use them a certain amount of times before they disappeared from his mind. At this point he could use a spell three times but could only retain two different spells in his head.

And like the warning had told them, they definitely hit his health. The stupefy spell, which Harry wasn’t as familiar with, took thirty health points away. The Reparo spell only five. Still the implications were so huge that Harry felt the impact to his health was worth it. It wasn’t something he was going to want to overuse though.

After several weeks of loop-days, Harry finally decided he was done with the library. He could stay there forever of course, reading different books, but he had memorized the geography of the region, a lot of the history, and read through several small time skill books, such as how to set a fire, how to hunt, and set up a tent, things that would no doubt be useful once he was satisfied and moved beyond the tutorial phase.

He had even studied up on the gods which had paladin orders, Ilmater, Tyr, Torm, Helm and Lathander. None of them leaped out as being someone he would swear to serve however. Torm was possibly the closest to his ideal. However Lathander also interested him as did Ilmater. Tyr seemed to be too distant and unemotional a deity for him, and Helm, well unthinking obedience wasn’t something Harry ever wanted to be associated with. Harry had also learned that as a paladin he couldn’t learn how to lock picks. He also couldn’t learn how to intimidate, it was apparently beneath a paladin which was kind of odd to Harry, but he wasn’t going to complain given he had experimented with Lay on Hands, and it worked even without Harry swearing himself to a specific deity.

With a newfound desire to see if he could up his level or stats, Harry took to moving around the keep even more than he already had been, taking a series of small quests, both from Gorion and from others. ,

It was an intriguing time, though none of the quests he found added to his stats. All of them did give him experience, but not enough to level up. And Harry discovered that every quest only gave him experience the first time he did it.

That didn’t stop Harry from continually finding Phyldia’s book for her, because she kept on giving him a jewel for it, which was there the next day, unlike any money earned. That rather bothered Harry, but he supposed his money pouch was a part of this world, whereas his item box was it’s own separate, and very small, dimension.

He ended up with eighty jewels separated into eight slots in his item box, having just spent those days to do that and actually get to know the older woman who became rather interested in him. He was even able to raise their relationship level to flirtatious, earning a +1 to his charisma, although only the first time alas.

At the other end of the relationship spectrum was, oddly enough, the odd woman named Imoen. She was a short girl, maybe only five feet two if that, with long brown hair to her shoulders, clean but not well cared for beyond that, a winsome smile and ready wit, at home in either leathers or the cloak everyone in the Keep habitually wore day to day. Her class was a thief, and she loved it.

But the reason why she was at the opposite end of the relationship spectrum from Phyldia was Harry couldn’t impact their relationship at all. The only time he could find her even for a few minutes was if he decided to forgo shaving and headed out to get some food in the morning from the inn instead of waiting for the refectory to serve lunch. There she was running out on her own errand, and, after only a few minutes of back and forth banter, she would rush off.

He learned from this that she was a bit of a thief in truth not just in class: she enjoyed picking locks, setting traps, and pickpocketing for fun. there was never anything malicious about what she did, it was simply a way to challenge herself. She liked pranks, dirty jokes, and was insanely jealous of Harry leaving the keep. She wanted to go, but had been refused permission thanks to her own step-mother, Mme. Barca, a senior Keeper, saying she wasn’t ready for it yet despite being only a year younger than Harry in his new body. After two weeks of trying to interact with her longer or even find her after that, Harry gave up, deciding this had to be part of the game somehow.

Eventually, Harry got to the point where he felt he had plumbed the depths of Candlekeep the tutorial. It was time to move on and see what else the world had to offer. However, something was about to occur that would change that opinion.

**OOOOOOO**

Tonks was angry though she would be hard pressed to decide whether or not she was more furious at herself or the world around her. The talk she had just stomped away from with her mother had not helped matters. “’Well, if Harry wasn’t going to approach you, then perhaps, you should have tried to approach him’ my ass! I was a Hufflepuff, he was a Gryffindor, I was a seventh year, he was a little firstie, how the heck was I supposed to meet him outside of mealtimes, and crossing tables at mealtimes was practically forbidden! Stupid house rivalries, stupid Snape, jumping down everyone’s throats, stupid teachers with their bloody mixed messages,” Tonks snarled as she stomped down the street from her parent’s house.

The fact of the matter was, Tonks was feeling guilty about the fact that she had never approached Harry, despite the fact that they were family. She really wasn’t happy about that, but seventh year at Hogwarts was just so dang busy! She had her prefect duties, she had her training to get up to snuff before joining the Auror corps, and she had her regular classes. She just didn’t have any free time, that was why she had never gotten back together with anyone after she and Charlie mostly broke up the year before.

At the same time, that was all an excuse. She hadn’t wanted to approach Harry, she hadn’t really known how to relate to. Walking up to him and saying “Hi, my name is Tonks, never ask about my first name, did you know that I used to change your diapers” would probably not have worked, given how shy and insular the kid had seemed to be at the time. And to be blunt, she hadn’t really thought much about him at all other than that first day when she saw him at the welcoming feast. Call it the insular mindset of a teenager, but she hadn’t.

Now the kid was gone, and there seemed to be little to know way to find him. “Not that I’m involved with the search much, if at all. Muggle expert my tight, taut arse!” she groused as she found an empty alleyway. Making certain there was no one around, she then apparated into her apartment off Diagon Alley. “If I’m such an expert why don’t they bloody actually ask me anything!?”

Tonks knew she really didn’t have anything to add to the A-team for the elderly, they had the knowledge, the power and the resources, all she had was imagination and some more knowledge about computers, which they seemed to think wasn’t enough. Not that they’re having much like either.

The Unspeakable Croaker had somehow found out where Harry had found the computer and had gone on the warpath in that direction. Borgin, despite having obliviated himself of the sale, was now in jail, and Malfoy was also in jail being questioned since Borgin hadn’t made himself forget who had sold him the item Croaker was so concerned about.

Minister Fudge had tried to stop the investigation, tried to get Malfoy freed. But Croaker was an Unspeakable, and their laws were older than the Ministry. Fudge could dismiss one of them for cause, but only if the other Unspeakables agreed. And getting in the way of their investigations was a worth a very quick ticket to a Veritaserum interrogation. After having this explained to him in very small words, Fudge had, very reluctantly and yet oh so satisfyingly (Tonks and Moody had both been there when Albus and Algernon had laid down the law) been forced to back off.

Mad Eye was now helping on that end, having already figured out Harry’s movements prior to disappearing. But while they’d figured out what Harry had done, they hadn’t figured out where he might have gone, and there was nothing hinting at that.

The headmaster’s attempts to find the house elf involved had proven fruitless. He was now trying to work out what could have happened if the Soul Trap didn’t activate appropriately thanks to all the other magic in action, and the muggle computer itself. He wasn’t having much luck, and worse, he had to prepare for the inevitable fallout when school began and Harry didn’t show up. Even Mad Eye was kind of worried about the fallout from that, but they had Malfoy and anyone else they could smear with it ready to take the fallout. Yet that wasn’t getting them any closer to finding Harry.

It all came back to the computer, Tonks groused. Something about it, the thing’s programming or the house elf’s magic has somehow sent Harry somewhere. With Croaker unable to tell anyone about the Soul Trap thanks to his Oaths, the idea Harry had been teleported somewhere was the most viable occurrence anyone could think of. But only Tonks was thinking that maybe the computer itself held the kid to finding him. But the others were blinded by their own gray hairs, and wouldn’t listen to her.

Stalking around her apartment Tonks worked herself into a frothing anger at that, then abruptly turned and stalked out of her house, making her way to the ministry building. There she made her way to Croaker’s office. There she didn’t find the man himself, he was with Moody right now going over the plunder of the Malfoy manor raid.

This, to her mind, was part of the problem. Only Albus was really trying to find Harry any longer. The other two had let their interests in getting rid of more Dark objects and wizards out of circulation blind them to the fact Harry might be out there somewhere, needing rescue. *If this doesn’t work, no harm done, if it does, the worst that can happen would be that I join Harry wherever he is.*

Determinedly, Tonks moved over to the computer sitting down in front of it. Reaching forward she turned it on. Beyond the noise and the weird light nothing seemed off to her. The operating system powered up, and nothing more happened. With a shrug and a muttered “Bloody hell, don’t know what everyone was afraid of,” she began to use the mouse to look around. She discovered there wasn’t much on the computer, only the regular Windows stuff, and a few games. *Could the games have been affected magically but not the rest?*

With nothing more to go on since her first thought of just powering up the computer and something happening hadn’t worked, she examined the games critically. “Now if I were Harry Potter, which game would I want ta play?”

After a moment she clicked on the Baldur’s Gate icon, and finally something happened. The screen flashed white, the computer went blort, and Tonks disappeared.

**“Warning, this is only a single player game, you cannot play it at the same time! Fitting you into a contextual template, please wait.”**

“Whut?” Tonks muttered, staring around at absolute blackness. “Whut the bloody hell is going on here?”

**OOOOOOO**

This time when Gorion mentioned going to bathe he shook his head. “I think I’ll go exercise the Master of Arms first. No reason to bathe and then go sweat again is there?” Harry knew from experience that training with the man would lead into the series of quests which would let him and Gorion prepare to leave the Keep that afternoon. He had never completed those quests yet, but he was ready to move on now.

“Spoken like a true boy, whatever your height,” Gorion said with a laugh, clapping Harry on the shoulder.

Harry smiled back, having come to greatly enjoy his time with Gorion. The two of them would meet in the morning like this then later have lunch together. Harry could then choose to spend the evening in the library, reading side-by-side with Gorion asking Gorion questions about his adventures out in the world. In this manner, and thanks to the amount of time Harry had spent here in the tutorial, Gorion had become what the game had called him, the closest thing to a father figure or at least a male role model that Harry had. It wasn’t very close admittedly, but it was the best Harry had ever had.

“I’ll tell him to expect you then,” Gorion said with a smile, “and I hope that you will be ready to leave this afternoon. I’d like us to leave if we can today.”

Nodding at that, Harry got up and exited the room, avoiding the Cassandra encounter for the first time in several days. Of course, this way also took him outside in the keep’s training ground at the same time that Imoen was exiting the inn. He smiled and waved at her when something odd happened.

Everything sort of shimmered for a second, like the world had paused or, or maybe skipped like a record hitting a scratch. Harry stared around him but no one else seemed to have noticed and he frowned, wondering if it had been his imagination. And then Imoen stumbled, and would have fallen if Harry hadn’t caught her. “Imoen, are you okay?”

“Ergh, take me back home Daddy, that twirl and hurl’s livin’ up to it’s name…” Imoen groaned. “What the bloody buggering shite was that all about? and why does me chest feel so much smaller?” she looked up at Harry’s face and blinked. “And who’re you supposed ta be scruffy?”

This caused Harry to stare at Imoen in shock, almost dropping her, his shock growing deeper as her hair started to change into a light pink color. “What the heck…”

End Chapter

So there you have it. the character creation aspect sort of blindsided me by how long it took, but I think in general I am happy about how this all worked out. I think the beginning, the reasoning behind how the computer worked the way it did, could be better - Borgin’s part in it seems too pat- but still, I think it worked out very well. And I’m happy with how the rest of the chapter worked out, although I wanted to put in some more at the end. But y’know, time constrants. Anyway, hope you all enjoyed it too, and as always tell me your thoughts.

**Chapter 2: Crazy girls and a New Journey**

Harry could only gape in shock at the person in front of him currently wearing the form of Imoen.  But from that simple statement the person within that body was certainly not Harry's supposed best friend in this game.  Not that, thanks to the way the tutorial world seemed to force them to stay apart did that make any big difference to him.  No, it was the other aspect of this that was astonishing. After all, no one here would ever use the term tilt-a-whirl, or even know what it meant, and 'bloody hell' was a pure British idiom.  For a moment, the shock of this caused Harry to simply stare at whoever this was, unable to respond.

For her part, Tonks was still dealing with internal issues.  Her body just felt **wrong** in a way that Tonks had never felt before.  And since she was a fully trained Metamorph, that was saying something.  But the changes were not ones that she had ever felt before, both mental and physical.  It was as if something was missing, or something out of reach. Her balance was all wrong, yet right at the same time, her body feeling right, but Tonks not feeling at home in it.  *But that was it really,* she thought,*it's as if my body has instincts, and my head has instincts, and they're fighting.*

Finding herself in the arms of a tall, somewhat handsome stranger, with somewhat long black hair and a face with high cheekbones and smile lines around his mouth, was another issue.  Most of the time, Tonks wouldn't have any issues with such an arrangement, she was a flirt and she enjoyed relationships. Tonks even knew she had a bit of a type which this guy met pretty well: tall, well-muscled, and with a sense of humor, thank you Charlie Weasley.

But at the moment, there were other things intruding.  First were the guy's emerald eyes, which were a little disconcerting.  Second was the gaped mouth look of astonishment he was wearing, and the fact that he was also wearing what looks like medieval clothing.  Robes she could've ignored; those were the normal wizardly thing. But leggings, pantaloons, and a leather jerkin under a chest plate of armor? Not so normal.

"What did you just say?" the man asked while Tonks was trying to get her mental feet under her.

Somewhat surprised that the big guy spoke English, Imoen pushed away from him only to stumble, her instincts and her body still telling her two very different things.

Harry put his arm around her, studying her and looking intently into the girl's face.  "What did you just say?" he asked again.

"Back off scruffy," Imoen grumbled, smacking him on the chest with an arm, then wincing at the impact to his metal chest plate.  Despite that though she continued. "I'm not some damsel in distress waiting around for Prince Ccharming ta sweep me off me feet."

"I've been called many things, but Prince Ccharming has never been one of them," Harry said dryly.  "Now are you going to answer my question or not, Imoen? Or do you have another name I should call you?"

"Imoen? Who's that?" Tonks grumbled, trying to step away again and finding her balance this time.  "Mey name’s Tonks., Wwhatever that thing sent me, that hasn't changed."

"Well, Tonks," Harry said with a small grin, pointing down at her body.  "I'd say either you hit your head, or something went wrong somewhere else, because you are wearing the body of Imoen, a young woman who I know pretty well."

Imoen looked down at herself, and Harry watched as her eyes widened.  She frantically patted her chest, then closed her eyes and concentrated, as if she was constipated.  Harry couldn't stop himself from laughing, and Imoen glared up at him reaching for her waist only to pause in shock as she realized not only was her body different, but she was wearing different clothing and she couldn't change her body back!

"Where's my wand?!” The now pink haired girl shouted, actually getting into a fighting stance.

Harry backed away, holding his hands up.  "Now hold on, I have no idea where your wand is, I..."

To say that Imoen was a bit headstrong was an understatement.  To say that Tonks was a bit headstrong was also an understatement.  So whether it was physical or mental, both of them were very prone to quick reactions.  That was why Imoen punched out hard for Harry's face before he could finish speaking. Tonks had been trained somewhat in unarmed combat, mainly by her father who was a pugilist in his spare time, and for exercise purposes as well byas her partner Moody, who firmly believed in training both the body and the mind.  It was a classic right hook, and it should have laid out the big bloke in front of her, smacking into his jaw with punishing force.

Instead, he dodged back at the last second, and Tonks was so unused to her new body that she overextended.  This let the man grab at her wrist and push her further off balance, before trying to back away. Her next punch though took him in the chest, but he just took it on her his mail, twisted, and then grabbed at her arm again.  He wasn't very skilled, but he was fast, and before she could get away, he pulled her into a bear hug around the waist, lifting her off the ground, holding her there. She tried to headbutt him, but he lifted her too high into the air and she couldn't contort her neck at enough of an angle to do it.  She tried to lift her knees, but they weren't quite up to where they could do anysome real damage.

This left her basically flailing in his arms, kicking at his shins causing no damage as far she could tell, although she saw yellow and green flashes appear to one side of her line of sight.  It joined a lot of other things there, inboth yellow, green and orange, which she hadn't noticed appearing before this. Now she continued to ignore them, like they had been the little flashing lights that you got when you looked into the sun or squinted too hard.  A saner individual might have wondered about them since they had stayed there for so long after she had recovered herself sufficiently to throw a punch. But Tonks was not most individuals.

Other individuals might've also noticed that they were in the middle of what looked like a giant library and comported themselves thus.  This might even have stopped them from throwing a punch in the first place. Again, Tonks was not such an individual. She kicked and screeched, shouting, "Let me go you big oaf! Where's me wand?! I'll hex you into next week!"

"You're, oww, you're making a scene," Harry grunted, as he lost a point of health.  Her kicks to his shins weren't doing much damage individually, but she was kicking him so often that ten kicks piled up soon, equaling to -1 to his health bar.  Yet even so Harry simply kept up his bear hug.

She tried to wiggle out of it,.  bBut Imoen simply wasn't strong enough to get away from him now that she had herhim in his grip and she’d had been too disoriented earlier to use her own agility, which Harry thought was a bit higher than his own, to dodge him.  At least it should be if she's still a thief like Imoen was.

Realizing other people were around them, Tonks raised her voice.  "Help! Rape! Get him off me!"

This did not broker the response that it should have.  More than one of the robe-wearing individuals she now noticed all around them turned to her glaring and even shushing her, raising their fingers to their mouths to indicate that she should be quiet.  Others simply laughed, shaking their heads. One of them even said "if you two are going to roughhouse, kindly take her outside, Harry."

The name Harry pulled Tonks up short, and she stared at the man who had spoken, before looking down at the man who was holding her in the air.  "Harry? You can't be Harry!"

Narrowing his eyes up at her, Harry shook his head, and tossed Imoen over one shoulder.  Before some smartly saluting the man who had spoken. "Yes, sir., Ttaking her outside right now , sir."

That won another round of chuckles from a few of the watchers, but even more censorious shushing from the majority.  And before Tonks could try to say anything further, the large man holding her, who might have the name Harry in what had to be a coincidence, was carrying her out of this's library portion and into a hallway beyond.

"I might not look like old Harry but that's who I am miss, whereas you look like Imoen, who is supposed to be my best friend in this world.  So why don't we stop trying to fight one another, and go somewhere where we can talk without being overheard?" Harry asked, then added a plaintive, "Please?" as Imoen somehow kicked a little higher than she had before.

Realizing she couldn't get out of the guy's grip and that she might have once more put her foot in it, Tonks scowled, but nodded her head.  "Fine, just put me down, will you."

"You promise not to try and thump me one?" The man asked, looking up at her face from a few inches below her own.

"Fine, I pPromise," Tonks grumbled.

The man gently set her on her feet, and even held her shoulders until she found her balance, before backing away quickly.  The two of them stared at one another for a moment, then the man gestured down the corridor. "Come on, my room’s this way."

"Already inviting a lady back to your room? Don't you think we should exchange names first?" Tonks quipped, using humor to cover a new sense of unease.

But that unease vanished instantly as the man in front of her blushed, looking away quickly and actually backing away another step.  "Ack, n-N, none of that, I, I mean your good-looking and all but no, I..."

"Enough," Imoen said with a laugh.  "Good grief, you'd think that you'd never talked to girls before?"

"Well considering I've only been able to have conversations with girls, outside of one particular girl back home, since I arrived here, and before that I thought of girls as just guys with odd bodies, I think I'm doing pretty well," Harry retorted.

"I'll be the judge of that, and everything else you just said was so weird that I am honestly even more confused now than I was ten minutes ago," Tonks said, shaking her head.  "Still, show me your room, sure. And while we’re walking, you can tell me if there is any other person named Harry here, Harry Potter."

The man in front of her actually smirked at that, shaking his head as he regained some opf his earlier poise.  "I think we are going to have a very long discussion then."

The rest of the walk was thankfully silent if not quick.  Tonks took the time to get used to her body further, and tried to transform it into her old form, but found she couldn't.  She found she could change her hair color, but it wasn't automatic, and she couldn't change the rest of her body on at all.  That was worrisome, very worrisome. Iin particular one area, that was now grabbing most of her attention. *Why the heck can't I grow me baps?! They're so tiny now! Cocky Nora I look like a boy! That's just wrong.*

Setting that to the side by figuring it was some kind of magic in the area that stopped her own body's internal magic from operating, she looked back at the man leading her down the corridor, glaring at him almost.  She had no idea where she was, no idea where her wand was, and this guy was talking to her so familiarly at first, and then manhandling her like that. What was up with that!?

But Tonks was a trained Auror.  She eventually set that anger aside and took in where they were as they walked up a flight of stairs, then along another long corridor.  They looked to be in some kind of giant castle, larger by far than any she had ever visited with her father on their excursions into the non-magical world and larger even than Hogwarts.  It was also built far more of stone inside than wood and had an all-around more solid and somewhat unwelcome feel. This place was meant to be a fortress first, and a library second/. Creature comforts mattered not at all.

Eventually, they entered a small room which Tonks saw held a single bed, and a small dresser with a small mirror on top of it.  She quickly pushed around the big guy, grabbing at the mirror, and holding it up to her face. She looked at herself quizzically, and then finally nodded slowly.  *I don't look all that bad,* she thought, a little thinner in the face, and that scar over one eye is interesting.  It looked like it had been done by a claw or something. *There must be a story behind that.*And she had her pink hair as she had thought.  *I could do worse, I suppose.  But why the hell am I stuck in this form? Now to get some answers about this place.*

She turned to the man across from her and crossed her arms angrily, staring at him.  "All right, talk. What did you do to me? Why am I stuck like this? Where's Harry Potter!?"

Harry held up his hand, feeling a little intimidated now that he was sitting down and Imoen was almost looming over him.  "Hold on! I don't know any of those answers except for the last one, okay. I didn't do anything to you, and I've no idea what you even mean by 'stuck like this'? How did you even arrived here, what's the last thing you remember?"

At that Tonks' eyes narrowed, but she backed away, thinking hard.  Then it all came back to her. "The computer!" She shouted. She looked at the guy in front of her, then waved her hand.  "You wouldn't understand what that is, never mind. Oh my God, I was teleported here wasn't I, and what was that weird voice saying, template? Molding me into a contextual template?"

"I know what context is," Harry said slowly, "and I know what a template is, it's the thing they used to create designs or something like that in metal right?"

"Um, maybe," she muttered, "but I have no idea what it means when you put those two words together either." She paused again, thinking hard, trying to remember what happened in that place of utter nothingness before everything went all fluid, all her senses rebelling at once.  "Iit said it was a single player game, what the hell does that mean?"

"There I think I can help you," Harry said with a sigh, holding up his hand.  "But first, perhaps we should introduce ourselves?"

"Fine whatever," Tonks muttered, still trying to piece together her shattered memories, and coming up with a lot of black nothingness.  Those words hadn't even been spoken aloud, not really. It was more as if they had been seared into her brain, because at the time, there had been literally nothing around her.  *Weird.*She shook her head.  "Anyway, why don't you go first, scruffy?"

"Fine, if only to stop you from calling me scruffy.  You would not believe how often I've nicked myself shaving," the man said shaking his head and causing her to laugh.

"I don't know, I might, I was at a boarding school for most of my teenage years after all, and more than a few kids developed scruffy faces before they learned the shaving spell."

Now fully convinced that this wasn't some odd game thing and that this person in front of him really was someone else Harry nodded again.  It's like her soul has somehow been transported into Imoen's body, or something like that anyway. Setting the how of it aside as unimportant, Harry held out a hand.  "Well, my name is Harry Potter, how do you do?"

"Okay I said it before, but you cannot be Harry Potter," Tonks said glaring at the man now and tapping a toe down on the floor as if she was debating whether or not to kick him.  "Harry Potter was a little over twelve years old before whatever occurred to him occurred. I'll fully believe that I'm in the same world he's in, but he's only been gone for a week and a half.  There is no way that Harry Potter grew up what, five years six years, in that amount of time! Not even the best Ttime Turner could explain that kind of difference in time."

"What's a Ttime Turner?" Harry asked, blinking at the apparent non-sequitur.

"Never mind, and explain," Tonks growled, glaring at the man.

Now becoming angry himself, Harry crossed his large arms in a move that he knew was intimidating, and even flexed them a little, something he rather enjoyed doing on occasion now that he had muscles to speak of.  "I'm not going to tell you anything until you tell me your name! This isn't some kind of interrogation, this is an information exchange, and one that you need a lot more than I do, miss! Or didn't you notice all the status windows over there?" He finished, gesturing to one side.

What? Tonks blinked, then actually looked directly at the several small squares of different sizes that had showed up in the corner of her eye.  Now no matter how she turned her head, they were still there, in the upper left corner, not blocking her vision in any way, but simply hanging there in space.  "What the heck?"

"Those are status screen.  You did mention that a voice told you this was a game, remember?" Harry asked, rolling his eyes.

Imoen's scowled but nodded.  "All right fine, so what do I do with them."

Harry was still glaring at her though with his arms crossed.  "Your name, and why you're searching for me." He reported firmly.

Imoen scowled back and entered into a staringed contest with the man for a few seconds, but finally decided to answer.  "Fine, my name’s Tonks, no first name unless you want me to hex your bits off. I'm a magical policewoman, what're called Aurors, and I was searching for Harry Potter.  No one knew what happened to him, and now I'm staring at a guy who says he's Harry Potter, but is at least five, maybe six years older than Harry should be. So you'll understand that I'm a bit stressed!"

"I thought police people worked in teams," Harry said slowly, trying to remember the few crime dramas he'd seen glimpses of while staying with the Dursleys.  Of course, they had never let him watch with them, but they were so deaf they had to turn the TV up a lot, so he always heard them under the stairs in his little cupboard.

Imoen faltered slightly, moving back and looking away.  "Yeah well, I wasn't exactly happy with how the investigation was going.  My partner had simply decided that getting the person who sent you away behind bars was more important and using him to roll up others of a similar mind.  The Unspeakables didn't have anything, or if they did, they sure weren't sharing it with me. So I snuck in and, kind of... investigated the computer we found in Harry's room."

Harry frowned further.  "This sounds as if it's more personal than it should be.  I mean, why would anyone care about me. That whole Boy Who Lived nonsense?"

Staring at him, Imoen frowned as well.  "Okay, everything coming out of your mouth basically tells me you know Harry Potter, but you still can't **be** him, you're too old! So why don't you just tell me where the real Harry Potter is, and then I'll answer your questions."

"I *am* the real Harry Potter," Harry said glowering at her.  "It's not my fault that time moves oddly here. You want proof of that, just wait till tomorrow.  Were in what's called the tutorial, and time doesn't pass it all during this stage. Every day just loops back."

"...  If you're telling the truth, that is bloody fuckin' scary," Tonks replied slowly, her eyes widening.  "Looping time like that in such a wide area, as this castle, that, would be practically impossible."

"Yet, it's been happening," Harry said.  "And I'm still giving you more information than you're giving me."

Tonks looked away, still not believing this guy was Harry Potter, but not knowing anything about the real Harry Potter to question him on.  Yet the talk about time not passing around them did give her pause, and she turned back to look at Harry closely, before sighing. "All right, a part of it, just a small part is because Harry is the Boy Who Lived.  I don't think you'd find any girl in Britain who wouldn't care about that bit, thanks to all those ruddy books. But the bigger part of it...the bigger part of it is that he's my cousin."

Harry blanched, his arms dropping from where they been crossed as she he stared at her.  "I, what, I, you, you’re my cousin!? Wh, since when do I have living relatives beyond the Dursleys?!"

*Crap either he really is Harry, or he's a damn fine actor.  "...OO*kay, there are a lot of different reasons for that.  I am related to Harry Potter yes, but it's not so much cousin, as cousin once or twice removed.  My grandmother married your grandfather. But as for why you never knew, well, there's was the whole Serious Black thing.  My grandmother was a Black, as was my mother, until she ran away from an arranged marriage to marry a muggleborn."

Harry's eyes narrowed.  "The Blacks are a so-called pureblood family like the Malfoys then?"

"Oh please," Tonks said waving her hand.  "Those Johnny come-lately Frenchies? The Blacks've been in Britain since forever! But the family was blacker than black you know.  And one of the daughters running away from an arranged marriage to another pureblood family caused lot of issues, so she was disowned.  But she was still technically speaking a Black, and like I said there was the whole Sirius Black issue there that kept Mum from trying to find out what happened to you.  Not that she would have been able to, mind you, no one but Dumbledore knew where you were."

"Sirius black issue? Are you saying that like it's a name, or a seriousSirius issue with the Black family?" Harry asked slowly trying to work it out for himself.

"Good one!" Tonks said with a smirk, giving him a thumbs up, before going on sSeriously.  "What, no one's ever told you? I mean how your parents were found?"

"No one's ever told me anything about that night," Harry grumbled, his hands moving to unlatch his armor and setting it aside before he leaned back against the wall behind his bed and stared at her.  "No one. Not even the teachers have ever told me what occurred that night. All I know is that Voldemort came after me that night, to kill me and my parents because they had defied him or something. Hell, I couldn't even get the teachers to tell me anything about my parents at all."

"Ah," Tonks said wincing.  "Okay, long story short, Sirius Black was for most of his life thought of as a white sheep of the Black family, a do-gooder funny man who liked pranks and was sorted into Gryffindor rather than Slytherin, as all the Blacks before him had been, even my mother, who eventually married a Muggleborn.  He was best friends with James Potter, your father. The two of them were inseparable, two pillars of a group called the Marauders. Master pranksters, they were a big deal back then. And then, well, your father married your mother, obviously, during the war against Voldemort. Then you came along, and not long after Sirius Black turns around, and...  and betrays your family's location to the enemy."

"So my father was targeted because his old friend turned back to his family?" Harry asked.  "Okay, that makes some sense. What happened to him though?"

"One of their other friends, Peter Pettigrew, found him, and shouted out a challenge in a crowded street.  Sirius Black responded, killed the guy as well as twelve Muggles with an exploding curse. He was captured at the scene by a group of Aurors and Obliviators.  According to them, he even admitted to the crime." Tonks sighed. "And before that, he was my favorite cousin, always over at my house, always you know palling around with me, when I was a baby and then a toddler.  My family was known to be good friends with him and that put us under even more suspicion, even if my mother had disowned the Black name."

Harry nodded slowly taking this all in.  As Tonks continued explaining how Sirius had been sent to the magical prison called Azkaban, to be tormented for the rest of his life by creatures called Dementors there.  But then a thought occurred to him, and he looked at her, pulling his knees up to his chest and suddenly looking a lot smaller than he had before. "But, you're... you if you were a toddler back then, you're only what, five or six years older than me? Doesn't that mean you, you were at Hogwarts last year?"

"For my last year yeah," Tonks said, before she realized where this was going as Harry finished pulled his knees up, almost hiding his face between them and his arms which he pillowed on top of them.  The sight of this massive, well-muscled and all around tough looking guy looking so small and almost afraid should have been comical, but it wasn't as Tonks could see the hurt and distrust in Harry's face.  Shit! Tonks, you just put your foot in it big time!

"Why didn't..." Harry began behind his arms.  "I suppose, you, you didn't..."

"I didn't approach you that's right," Tonks said, taking the bull by the horns so to speak.  "You wouldn't know, but seventh years are incredibly busy with our NEWT examinations, trying to figure out our apprenticeships, taking extra classes to look better for our chosen professions going forward.  It's immensely busy, and besides that, I was a Hufflepuff, not a Gryffindor. I couldn't walk up to a little Gryffindor firstie, not without causing waves and making a lot of people wonder."

Tonks stared at Harry for a moment, then sighed and sat down beside him, reaching forward to touch his arm.  He flinched, and Tonks frowned, feeling her hair go manky and brown as she took in how he responded to even that light touch.  He wasn't even looking at her now, simply trying to move away, and curl up further.

For Harry this was a bit of a nightmare made real.  He had magical relatives, at least one of whom had been in a position to approach him.  But she hadn't. She either hadn't cared enough, or just didn't think he was worth the bother.  That hurt, that got right past his newfound maturity and his Gamer's Mind ability to stay calm and hit him right in the heart, causing him to regress to being the young boy who had been locked away in a cupboard with no one but spiders for company, always wondering if he really was a freak and deserved to be locked away.

Kid thinks I rejected him, but damn it that was the reason why I never approached him.  Desperate to salvage something from this, and now fully realizing that yes, this guy was Harry Potter, and he really was around 13 rather than his apparent physical age, Tonks began to talk rapidly.  "But that's all a lie. The real reason I didn't approach you, is I was afraid.”

That caused Harry's head to shoot upwards. Hand he turned to stare at her, and she nodded.  "I told ya I grew up on stories about the Boy Who Lived. All girls in Britain did, even if my mom did a better job of stopping most of the hero worship that went with it in me.  But we knew, or thought we did, that you had been, you know, looked after by Dumbledore or someone he personally chose. And I personally thought you would be far too leery of me because of my connection to Sirius, regardless of our family connection.  It wouldn't've been the first time someone didn't want to be associated with me because of that. One of my boyfriends, his family kept on trying to get him to break up with me for a while because of that connection. They thought I was destined to go Dark myself even without a Dark Lord around to rally behind.  Drove him to dragons, apparently. And also unfortunately away from me, more's the pity. So I was afraid you would reject me, I was worried how much that wouldit hurt. And honestly, you didn't seem to need any new friends or family. First you had that Ron guy and became an honorary Weasley, and then there was that bushy haired girl who shattered all the academic records, what's her name?"

"Hermione," Harry said, slowly letting his arms fall and his leg stick out again.  But he was still looking at her very warily. "And looks can be deceiving. I..." He looked away, wiping at his face, though he hadn't thankfully cried, Imoen wasn't sure she would've been able to handle that.  "I would've given anything” he said, his voice almost vibrating with emotion. "I would've given anything to have more family than my relatives.”

"Yeah," Tonks said slowly.  "That's, I got that impression when I walked into the Dursley's house looking with my partner after Dumbledore called him in.  I wasn't even supposed to be there, but Dumbledore and Made-Eye were old friends, and he wanted an Auror's perspective. But of course when I made suggestions, none of them listen to me thanks to my age.  Seriously! It was getting really irritating, being ignored because of my age." Tonks finished, throwing her arms up in frustration.

"That's a tune I've run into a few times too," Harry said, now lowering his legs entirely and leaning back against the wall to look at him her.  "So what did you do?"

"Well," Tonks said, smirking impishly., "I decided to let loose my inner Gryffindor.  The hat said I could go into one ofany three of the houses you know, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff.  I chose Hufflepuff, because a few of my friends had already been sorted there, which obviously was the deciding factor, since it showed so much loyalty.  What about you?" she asked, going off on a tangent.

Harry winced.  "Slytherin and Gryffindor.  It said I was ambitious, and had a certain amount of cunning too.  But I'd already met up with..."

"The junior Malfoy. Yyou mentioned him, yeah," Tonks said with a nod.  "I can understand why you wouldn't want to be around him. Anyway, I let loose my inner Gryffindor and snuck into the Department of Mysteries., Tthat's a sort of branch of the Ministry that deals with unusual magics, mostly by storing them away and keeping them from the general public.  I found the computer and powered it on. I then found the last program you'd used, clicked on it, and then was in this kind of nothingness area with a voice ringing in my head talking about a game and contextual template."

"And no one else is going to come after us?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Tonks said with a shrug.  "Wizards aren't exactly up on technology if you know what I mean.  The unspeakable, Croaker, he knew what the computer was, but not anything else.  They were trying to decipher all of the magics on it at the time, and they'd already found two of the things that you or someone else did to that computer." She let that sink in for a moment before asking, "Now, why don't you tell me what happened, okay?"

"Okay," Harry said with a nod.

To Tonks' eyes he still looked really leery of her, and hurt, but there was nothing she could do about that now.  Except maybe mention how she'd seen him as a baby. *But that wouldn't really help matters here would it?*

From there Harry went on to describe how he had rebuilt the trashed computer, why he'd done so, and everything else that had occurred because of or during the project.  After hearing the disgust directed towards Dumbledore by his cousin, and oh boy was that going take some getting used to, he described how Dumbledore had returned him to the Dursleys when Harry had pretty much escaped to the Leaky Cauldron.  He also mentioned how the man had known that he was essentially abused there, if not physically very often then emotionally and mentally all the time. He then went on to describe how he had found some help in a few of the more disreputable places using a disguise.

Tonks winced.  "And that's where you went wrong kiddo.  Those kinds of stores, they're not just, you know, lowbrow., Tthey're Dark as Dark can be, peddling to the worst our society has to offer.  I know that guy, Boardman, he has been investigated more times than I can think of off-hand, although no one has been ever been able to make anything stick."

"Yeah, well maybe I would've known that if I knew anything more about the whole magical world! Seriously, there needs to be like a class or something, an introduction to the wizarding world." Harry paused, then thumped one hand into his other palm, his tone mocking.  "Oh wait, there is. Only I was never given it because I'm the Boy Who Lived! Obviously, I should know everything." With that he rolled his eyes and bangeding his head hard enough against the wall hard enough to cost him a health point.

At that Tonks laughed weakly, shaking her head.  "Yeah, I can fully understand your worries there, although don't blame me for that, I suppose everyone just thought, you know, that Dumbledore would've told you.  And now that I say it aloud, I realize how pathetic that was."

"Yeah..." Harry drawled.

The two of them fell silent for a few minutes, just staring at one another before Imoen shook her head.  "Right, okay, so now we know the back story here, or rather we know the back story of how we both got here., Yyou said something about this being the game? How does that even work?"

"You tell me," Harry said, shrugging his shoulders.  "House elf magic, Dark soul absorbing magic, Dark lightning magic, my own magics, all of that mixed up in a jumble and here we are.  How it works, that I'll leave to someone who actually understands magic, rather than someone who's just learned about it."

"Ouch Harry, I see you've learned the joys of sarcasm," Tonks muttered, frowning as Harry tossed the hot potato back to her.  She continued frowning for a few minutes thinking hard then shook her head, going on in an almost cheerful tone. "Nope, it's beyond me too.  But you said it’s like a game, tell me about that."

"Well first of all, this world being based off the game Baldur's Gate is the reason I look like this," Harry said, poking himself in the chest with a thumb.  I'm the main player of this game, the single player you mentioned earlier. But the player doesn't start out at age 14, so I was aged up to fit. I got this whole series of screens allowing me to customize myself, it was actually kind of cool.  It wouldn’tdidn't do anything to my hair for some reason, but everything else I was able to customize. Well except for my scar," he finished, motioning towards it. "It stayed regardless of whatever form I tried on for size. Which I've still got mixed feelings about that even now, frankly.  I mean, in a way it's a reminder that my parents cared for me, but on the other hand, it's a reminder of why I was set apart from other people. But it's there and I can't do anything about it. Beyond that, well I suppose we should just talk through your stats. Can you access your stats screen?"

When Tonks looked at him blankly, he rolled his eyes.  "Right, say something like status screen, or think it."

When the girl did so, nothing happened, and Harry frowned.  They tried to figure out other ways for Tonks to access her stats, but nothing worked.  Shaking his head, Harry put that down as a lost cause for now. "I had to find these information books before I could access some of my information.  I'd wager it's the same for you. For now, let's move on to announcements." Gesturing to one side Harry asked,  
Can you see all those? I can."

"Yeah, but what are they?" Tonks asked, staring at them herself.

"Those are bulletins marks, status changes, announcements from the game and so forth."

"So is the game kind of omniscient or something?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so anyway, it's not so much watching over us, as simply watching.  It will however sound very snarky occasionally, so I don't know." At Imoen's look, he explained some of the messages he got, and then walked her through enlarging the ones in front of her.

"Welcome to your new life.  Please wait while your mind and new body get to know one another.  You may experience dizziness, moments of delirium, tasting like the color pink, and smelling yellow." This line was contained in a black message box.

"...Whhut?" Tonks muttered, shaking her head.

"Yeah...  let's just put this to one side and go to the next one." Harry said with a shrug.  "I get the impression that whatever you did, the computer or whatever wasn't ready for it and is scrambling."

The next line was a little more understandable and tied into the scant knowledge Tonks had before this and was again in a black message box as well as being one of the longest single messages Harry had seen yet.  "Due to unforeseen circumstances, your soul has been transmuted into the body of a currently existingexiting individual, a template, in this new world, which was intended to only have 1 Gamer.  This is an unusual and dangerous maneuver, done only by the truly insane. While your previous skills might have some bearing on this new life, figuring out which will and which won't will not be easy.  Any blood-based abilities have been disabled. Any magic known will not carry over. Knowledge may, but remember this new life is just that, a new life.,"

"That explains some of what happened to you, I think." Harry mused.

"Okay," she said after a moment, "Yyeah, this game’s got a snarky ass sense of humor."

"I think it's also a bit," Harry paused clicking his fingers as he blanked.  "What's the word when something has two minds?"

"Schizophrenic? That's not a good thing to hear, kiddo," Tonks said, having now gotten used to the fact that this large beefy semi-handsome looking guy was young Harry Potter and eager to establish a big sister roll over him.  She knew it wasn't going to be easy, especially given how they had started and how she basically admitted that he she didn't want to be rejected by him during their time in Hogwarts, but she was confident she could do it.

"Not like that.  One of them is just a highly robotic voice.  The one I think controls the, well the world in general, makes the sun come up, the weather, makes certain that you know arrows fly in the correct form or whatever and also introduced me to this world in the first place.  And then there's the second voice, which tells us that we have interacted with the world around us in a significant way, how that has affected us and why. That second voice is snarky as all get out. Still, I can't deny that it is funny," Harry replied ruefully.

"So talk me through more of this game thing kiddo."

At Imoen’s requestquestion Harry explained the various stats and such like, along with the few set rules he had learned so far.  This helped earn Imoen a few more wisdom points. To both their surprise, this allowed her access to her stat sheet, though Harry couldn't interact with it.  Imoen couldn't either though that didn't stop her from reading what they could see aloud.

**Name:**Imoen

**Gender**: Female

**Race**: Human

**Class:** Thief level 4

The stats were blanked out as they had been for Harry, but for Tonks/Imoen they were utterly blank, completely gray, nothing visible.  Below that though the rest of the stat sheet’s organization resembled Harry's.

Bloodline Skills:

Metamorph (currently disabled - your stats do not match the needed level to use this bloodline skill), \*\*\*\*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*, Clumsy (permanently disabled, yes it was always a body issue, lucky you), \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Background notes**:

While at one point Imoen the thief might have been a happy- go- lucky thief with more curiosity than sense, that person's mind and soul has been replaced by that of the Tonks, a happy- go- lucky, plucky girl young Policewoman in training who liked to poke her nose into other people's business far more often than was good for her.  So no change there, really. It will be interesting how she interacts with the Gamer from this point on, as that interaction and his response to her will be the cornerstone of her future going forward in this new life.

For a moment, all Tonks could do was grumble about her Metamorph ability being disabled by her lack of stats, which she took to mean strength or intelligence in this case, shaking her head this way and that.  "All my training, all of my knowledge, and my most unique freaking feature, and it's just gone! What the heck is up with that, huh!?"

"That's not really true..." Harry said slowly.  He wasn't certain he trusted Tonks enough to tell her about this.  *But then again why would she betray me? We’re both stuck in this game, although I don't know if stuck is the right word for my own predicament.  I've actually enjoyed myself most of the time here, and I chose to be here after all. I put the computer together, I wanted to escape from the Dursleys, and I did that.*

With that in mind, Harry straightened his shoulders and smiled at Imoen/Tonks.  *I think I’ll just address her as Imoen from now on, much less annoying.*  "I figured out a way to bring the spells of our original world to here, which could be a major help going forward.  I think you'll like it. So long as you don't mind being taught a power that is described as you 'cheating like a bitch'."

Imoen laughed.  "You have no idea how many people have called me a bitch before this Harry, and for far better reasons in a few cases.  And besides, if you ain't cheating, you ain't trying. Lay it on me, kiddo." A moment later Imoen/Tonks was staring at the same message Harry had discovered when he had figured out he could still do some of the spells from his own world.

"Congratulations, you have cheated like a bitch! Because of your unique otherworldly status as a wizard where you came from, you have discovered the ability to use the spells from your own world in this one.  Don't get cocky though, because with each spell cast, your health points will take a hit! New Bloodline skill added, Mage of the Blood."

"Okay, that's cool, means that I won't be totally dependent on my unarmed skills, which aren't all that much to begin with.  But why do you think we can't interact with my stats, and can you think of any way to raise them? How big a deal is that anyway?" Tonks asked, frowning as she took in the details of the new technique, which apparently, she wouldn't be able to see from this point on unless she found the right skill book.

Harry frowned, scratching at the back of his head as he stared at the same notice thoughtfully.  "I don't know. What I see when I look at you is Imoen, my relationship status with you and vice-versa is semi-friendly, but on the low side for that scale.  And when you had your stat sheet out, I couldn't see the rest of your stats either. It might just be a side effect of the fact that this is a one player game you now, and the computer, whatever magic has shifted within it, still can't figure out a way to put in the second player so it doesn't really know how to treat you.  Or perhaps that's the way other people here always see their stat sheets. I know they can level up, but they can't control where their attribute or skill points are spent, so it isn't that big a leap to think they can't see their own stats at all."

"Beyond that..." Harry paused then breathed in slowly before going on.  "The first thing you need to know, is that today is going to repeat, like I mentioned earlier.  At 12 o'clock tonight, the day just sort of ends. Oh and we don't have dreams here., Llike, I go to sleep, and then I'm awake instantly a second later fully rested with this message about having slept in my bed and doing so renewing my magical points and health.  Or at least a second later to me, but the night has passed. And before this, I was the only person that remembered everything that happened." At that, he looked at her closely.

She blinked, backing away rapidly at that.  "Are you serious!? I know you said that time was repeating, but no one else remembers the day before?"

"That's right," Harry said with a sigh.  "Although it hasn't had much of an impact on me, not much of one anyway, not physically.  I've just been using the time to figure out people around here, and how the game works and everything else."

"Yeah, but you put in all that effort for a day to make friends, and then they forget you the next day?" Tonks asked solicitously.  "That's gotta suck."

"Actually, that's kind of helped too, I suppose.  Erm, I'm not the best at talking to other people, and um, seeing how they react, and then just trying again in a different way, it um, it’s kind of helped me a bit," Harry said looking away.

Sensing a teasing opportunity, Tonks leaned in, but winced as he tried to shy away.  Scowling at herself she pulled back but that didn't stop her from saying "Oh, do tell?" Then she blinked.  "Wait, you mentioned relationship status earlier, have you been taking advantage of this whole repeating a day thing to get in some lady's knickers?"

"Gah, no!" Harry flushed, backing away rapidly.  "That's not even an option, I mean it wouldn't, I wouldn't do it even if it was but, I know…that is..."

"Harry, calm down," Tonks said, frowning at herself again.  *Dammit, this boy really is still young, forget what his body looks like Tonks, remember inside he's still a youngster.*"It's okay Harry, I was just making a joke.  I didn't think you were going to do something like that.  But it ties into why I was so worried about the game making the act in a certain manner.  Have you heard about the Three Unforgivables?"

When Harry shook his head, she went on grimly.  "One of them is a spell that completely takes over a person's mind.  It’sAs one of the darker spells out there, because it suppresses an individual's willpower to such a degree that they can't fight back.  Strong-willed minds can fight it off, but if you're weak willed, it simply takes control, and forces you to obey the caster. And back home there is another spell called the Obliviate spell, and it's one of the ones that is most abused when it comes to dealing with muggles."

Harry nodded, his face showing he was both understanding, and horrified at the same time and she smiled.  "Ttaking advantage of a woman to that extent, and note," she said, poking Harry's forehead with a finger, "I said to that extent, in a physical sense, would be just as bad, because she wouldn't remember it the next day.  But, mind you, using a day like this to get to know a girl, that's fine. Just don't take it past the kissing stage, 'kay?"

At that Harry blushed again, which again looked very odd on his more mature face, but he nodded, and Tonks went on thoughtfully.  "Do you think... that is, does relationship status impact the information you can see from other people?"

"No," Harry said with a shake of his head.  "My relationship status with Gorion is at the 'family' level, and all that tells me is his class and level, level 28 Mage and level 24 Bard."

"Wait, you didn't mention that before." Tonks interjected.

"Yes I did.  I said you were a thief."

"Oh, huh that's my class then, missed that.  Okay, so that would make me able to, what, sneak around, lock pick, that kind of thing?"

"Only one way to find out," Harry said, gesturing out the door.  "It should be interesting to see if you can figure it out yourself and what it tells you."

Tonks held up her hand, making a calm down gesture.  "Hold on there. We're not done talking here just yet.  In fact, let's put that off until tomorrow. It will be a good first test if I can remember all this," she said grimly.  "And if I can't, we'll need a secret word or something you can tell me, something that will make me believe you when you say we’re repeating a day, and I can't remember things."

"Really, a single word will do that?" Harry said dryly, grimacing at the idea.  He had slowly begun to get weirded out by the whole forgetting things thing, and the idea that someone from his own world could be affected by it was disturbing to him even beyond it affectingeffecting people like Gorion, who he had become close to in his time in this 'tutorial'.

"Heh, yep.  Mad Eye, my partner, he's the most bloody-amazingly paranoid bastard you could ever hope to meet.  He's come up with all these different pass phrases and secret words to show if someone's been magically influenced.  Erm, let me try to remember." Tonks frowned, tapping her chin in thought. "Tthink the word was 'sasararas' or something, Now give me some more background about what's happening here." Tonks nearly ordered.

"So long as you keep telling me about yourself," Harry said firmly.  "I want this to be a two-way conversation, not just me telling you everything."

*Kid has major trust issues,* Tonks thought, still tapping her chin but she nodded.  "Sure kid, what do you want to know?"

"Well first, I suppose I should ask why you wanted to be an Auror and what it really means.  It is the first I've heard of such a profession, although I knew about the ministry and sort of figured they had to have their own Scotland Yard or whatever."  Harry asked, still feeling this new Imoen, Tonks or whatever, out.

"Oh Merlin, don't get me started kid!  Scotland Yard? Scotland Yard is a professional, practically apolitical group, who're supposed to serve the peace and also haves a decent budget.  I thought that the Aurors were the same way. But when I joined up, you would not believe the shit I had to go through. Not just because I was related to the infamous Blacks, but because I was a Metamorph, at least at first."

From there she went into an hour-long rant that told Harry a lot more about her personality then he had learned previously.  He learned she liked pranks, and liked manipulating her ability to shape shift, a power that he had never heard of before, to get back at people who angered her.  That she had a hair-trigger temper, something he had already feared was the case, was also proven. But he learned it burnt out just as quickly, and that she wasn't the kind to go around thumping people even when angry, something he had feared.  She got along well with her parents, who apparently had supported her being an Auror even though they knew that she was cruising for a bruising but hated the first name her mother had given her."

At that point, Harry interjected, "In that case, isn't this a bit of a new start for you?"

"What do you mean?" Tonks asked.

"Well, the body you're wearing is named Imoen, and that's the name I still see above you.  So whatever your name previously was, you're kind of leaving it behind, aren't you?" Harry said reasonably.

Tonks blinked, then grinned, and reached forward hugging Harry tightly not reacting to his sudden twitch when she did so.  "Oh that's awesome, Harry! I hadn't even thought about it. Fantastic." Harry flushed a little, feeling Tonks's curvy body pressing into his, but Tonks pulled him away quickly, winking at him, then hopped off the bed.  "I... am... Imoen!" She shouted thrusting her arm into the air. "No more Nymphadora or the jokes that come from it for me!"

"Really!" Harry began to laugh, shaking his head.  "That's your name!? What the heck was your mother thinking?!"

"Oh, that's it!" Tonks growled, and grabbed the pillow, smacking Harry over the side of the head and causing him to fall back on his side on the bed.  "That's enough of that out of you!"

While he hadn't ever dealt with something like this from a girl, the boys in Gryffindor had got into more than one pillow fight, magical and non.  There could be only one response to this. Growling, Harry rolled onto the floor, pulling his blankets loose from the bed and hurling it over Tonks' head.  With her thus entangled he then grabbed off the pillow and smacked her with it as she tried to get free from the blanket.

She in turn retaliated, grabbing at the pillow through the blanket and somehow pulling him off balance and back onto the bed, where, to his surprise, she leaped upon him, tickling him uproariously.  *Hah, so there's some hope for you yet, Harry.*

What followed was the first friendly wrestling match Harry had ever had, and it was kind of cathartic for the both of them.  The now newly renamed Tonks's fear and concern about being stuck in this 'game' had disappeared, although she was still very leery about what would happen at 12 o'clock.  Harry, for his part, had forgotten that part entirely and was just relieved that despite her being a relative, Tonks seemed a decent sort, and very fun to be around. In fact, again she reminded him of Alicia Spinnet, who was essentially everyone's big sister, except Fred Weasley.  Whatever was going on between them he didn't know, and frankly didn't want to know.

As they lay half on and half off the bed gasping for air, Tonks turned to Harry.  "Truce?"

"Truce," Harry said with a nod.

"Bloody good, because you're heavy.  Gerrof, ya big lug!" She said, trying to push him off and ignoring the rather suggestive way the two of them were laying.  Whatever possible attraction Imoen might have had for Harry’s new body had died a fiery death when he had shown his true age earlier.  That and the guilt at having not approached Harry while they were in Hogwarts.

Harry lifted himself off easily, then picked Imoen up as easily as he had before in the library, before setting her on the bed by the head, whereupon he sat on the other end.  They looked at one another for a moment, before Imoen visibly became serious again. "So, tell me about this game. You said something about non-player characters when you look at me, does that mean everyone acts like robots or something?"

"No," Harry said shaking his head.  "I think they have a set routine sort of, but they are human.  And that's something you need to learn right away," he said seriously, pointing at her.  "You have to treat the people here as if they were regular people. They each have their own lives; they all have their own abilities and minds and everything.  Don't mistreatmiss treat them, don't assume that they're just, you know, part of the scenery or something.  Wherever we are, despite the whole Gamer issue, which seems to be just a more advanced version of what other people around usme can do, the world itself is very real.  You can be hurt, you can hurt other people, and everyone here is alive."

"Okay..." Imoen said after a few minutes thought, scratching at her hair thoughtfully.  "That's incredible. I wonder then if we're not somewhere else, rather than in the game.  But then there **is** the Gamer aspect.  Does that kind of thing extend to other people?"

"It does and it doesn't at the same time.  There are two types of people here I've found.  There are Adventurer types, like Gorion and a few of the others here, I'll introduce you to him tomorrow.  That is," Harry seemed to falter, "If you can." He rallied quickly shaking his head and going on. "Anyway, Adventurers can come in a few basic classes, thief, mage, wizard, cleric, bard, warrior, ranger.  That kind of thing."

"What class are you?" Imoen asked, cocking her head thoughtfully to look at them.  *Warrior? Figures a kid his age would want to be something he had never been before.  If I was his age and I could have the physique of some kind wonder woman or something like that, you better believe I'd have jumped at the opportunity.*

Harry blushed and looked away, poking his fingers together sheepishly as he mumbled under his breath.

"I'm sorry I couldn't quite hear that," Imoen said, leaning forward and cupping her ear with one hand expectantly.  "What was that?"

Growling irritably, Harry answered in a louder tone, still looking away.  "I'm a paladin, all right!"

Imoen laughed.  "Kid, you are in Gryffindor and you're a young boy.  I'm not going to make fun of you for being normal and wanting to be a knight in shining armor.  Although," she teased, reaching out to poke the set of armor that Harry had set aside earlier. "This doesn't actually look all that shiny."

"It's the best armor I could find here in Candlekeep.  I doubt it is the best we’llwill find elsewhere, but it was the only one I could find in this tutorial segment," Harry retorted.  "Now it's your turn," he went on turning back to Imoen.

She rolled her eyes but flung her hands out to either side.  "I'm an open book kiddo," she quipped, leaning back and stretching, cracking her neck and back before leaning back against the wall again.

Harry frowned, thinking about what he'd already learned, and what he wanted to ask this cousin of his, who may or may not become the first such family member that he ever really wanted to acknowledge as such.  That still hurt, and he knew it would for a while: that she hadn't approached him, and that her family hadn't tried to take him in. But he would set those kind of serious matters to one side for now. "Tell me more about this Metamorph ability of yours.  Can it be learned? What's it like? I once read grew my hair back overnight, when Petunia gave me a haircut I didn't like. Is that the same kind of thing? Or is that just how you start?"

Imoen smiled at him, and then began to explain, interrupted by numerous questions from Harry.  As she finished, he frowned, thinking., "So, I mean do you have a regular body then?"

"Not really, no.  At least I didn't before this," she said gesturing to her new body.  "I can't seem to do anything but change my hair color, and even that is now taking an effort of will whereas before it would've simply changed with my moods if I wasn't careful.  Kind of the exact opposite of what I was used to, really. But in terms of my body, I can't remember what form I was born in, or even tell you how I'd look if I hadn't changed myself.  I mean I could change my height, so I did. I kept it at a height I was comfortable with. During puberty I had decided my chest was a little too small, so I changed that too occasionally." Imoen now pouted, patting her chest and then actually pushing them up slightly.  "Dammit! I really miss that aspect, this is what, barely size A? I look like a boy, blast it."

With that in mind, and without even noticing as Harry began to blush and stutter, Imoen actually reached down to her crotch and patted it there before nodding.  "Okay, good. Iit wouldn't be the first time I'd accidentally changed into a guy and not noticed."

"How could you not notice that?!" Asked Harry in a somewhat strangled tone.

"Let's just say that fire whiskey isn't the strongest magical drink out there, and I was very young and foolish to believe it was," Imoen replied with a wicked grin at Harry's embarrassment.  "Luckily, in my inebriated state I decided to mess with the guy who was trying to get me drunk, in a way he wouldn't find out about unless he..."

"Okay, enough thank you," Harry grumbled shaking his head.  *Okay, so she's a mix between a cousin I might like getting to know, and an offbeat uncle who is a bit of a pervert and you never want to acknowledge in public.*

Imoen smirked at him and leaned forward excitedly.  "All right, my turn." She thought about it for a moment, then said, "That relationship status thing, what does that do?"

Harry flushed a little, reminded of his adventures in that area.  "Well it, it doesn't do much, it's kind of boring if I'm honest."

"Right, pull the other one kid, it's got bells on," Imoen said, leaning back again and crossing her arms, actually giving Harry a glare that was pure Prof McGonagall.

"Um, wow, that's kind of scary," he said, shaking his head as he looked away.

"I might not be able to go the full body change to get give you even more of an impact, but she was my professor for years after all, and the best prank I ever did was to shape shift into people and do things that they had would have hated to do or be seen doing.  Now talk,." sShe ordered.

"I don't know much about it, I haven't been able to well raise the stats of anyone permanently remember.  But Gorion, he's family now. But that doesn't actually give me anything, in terms of stats boosts or whatever."

"But..." Imoen said, leaning forward.

Harry shuddered and took the plunge.  "But there is this bar girl here, her name’s Cassandra, and um...  if I raise our relationship status from 'interested' to 'very interested', she tells me about getting me a discount on beer, and um, something about lessons thatbut I never quitegot understood."

Rolling her eyes at that, Imoen shook herhis head.  "That's it? That's the only relationship thing you can do?"

"Well...  I can get this other woman, she's one of the younger Watchers here, to teach me something, but it's not actually usable for my class."

"So what's the point of the relationship header?"

"I don't know, all the game tutorial says when I look into it is that relationships can give boosts and stats later in the game.  So I can't figure out what they are now. Honestly speaking, I was pretty much done with the tutorial at this point. I've raised my stats as much as I could, I've done all of the preparation I can, I've even done a few quests in order to build up a nest egg," Harry intoned, counting off on his fingers.

"What do you mean?" Imoen asked, cocking her head to one side.

"Now we come to one of the greatest things about this game.  The item box!" Holding out his hand, Harry was suddenly holding a sword, then just as suddenly was holding a bow.  Both of them looked a little crude but were very simple but effective weapons. Then he was holding five small gems, uncut, and almost identical to one another.  In fact, they seemed almost exactly identical as Imoen looked at them.

Then he pushed his hand back into a small pouch, which he should never have been able to do, Imoen reflected, noting the size of the pouch.  "Okay," she said slowly, taking that into account with the disappearing, reappearing weapons. "That's all kinds of awesome. And is that something only you can do?"

"I don't know, though Gorion couldn't, and seemed very impressed the one time I told him about it.  Try it," he suddenly said, holding out the short sword.

She took it, and actually held it very well, frowning as she did as a status screen outlined in red in front of her.  "You have equipped a short sword.  Since you have a skill point spent on this weapon, you will see a buff to your offensive abilities while wielding it.  Find magical weapons or armor to add more to your speed and striking power."

"You get that kind of thing the first time you equip a weapon of a particular type," Harry said with a nod, once more showing her how to dismiss status screen.  "Now try to make it go into your item box, basically will it to go away almost." He watched as Imoen was able to do it, and grinned. "Awesome, right?"

"That, that beats out any mokeskin bag, or even any expanded trunk I've ever seen! It comes when I think about it, I mean, holy heck!" she said, holding the short sword out again then making it disappear, then again.  "Is there a limit to what we can hold?"

"Sort of," Harry said with a nod.  "There are a limited number of items I can carry, though a lot of them can be stacked, like gems and arrows.  Beyond that, the only limit is weight. I'm actually pretty strong, so I can hold up to 400 pounds. But as long as I don't go over that, it doesn't affect me at all.  If I take more, I get a warning about being 'encumbered' and I can't move as well." He grinned. "I actually put my bed into my item box, which could hold it, but then I couldn't move very well, I felt almost like a beached whale.  Not certain how it would effect combat though."

"That's insane! Do you know how awesome that would be for a soldier? Or hell, anyone, to be able to carry that much weight without feeling it?"

"I know," Harry said with a nod.  "The only problem now though is that we have no idea what your strength stat is."

"Yeah, that's gonna be a little irritating," Imoen thought angrily.  "Do you have any idea how we can figure out what my stats are?”

"Well, you could try wielding a club or another blunt weapon.  The damage you did to a dummy could tell us in a roundabout way what your strength is."

Imoen grimaced, then Harry pointed at her.  "However, I think I've told you enough about the game for this round.  My turn."

Pouting, Imoen made her sword disappeared, and looked at him.  "Okay, shoot."

"What were your favorite classes, what are your favorite spells, and do you think you can help me expand my own spell repertoire?"

"Well my favorite class was easily Transfiguration, kiddo., being a Metamorph myself I found it kind of easy, although I also loved the Charms professor, Flitwick.  The little guy, did you know he's a dueling master? I asked him to teach me a few tricks, and I learned more from him in a bare month of on-again off-again training than I did in the first two months of solid every day eight-hour training with the rest of the Auror trainees."

"As for my favorite spells," Imoen hopped up, moving into the center of the room.  "Well, let's see if they translate."

She held out a hand, as if she was about to summon up her sword, then flicked her hand forward, moving her hand in a flick then a twitch to the other side, shouting out a spell.  "Lacero!" From her hand there appeared a wide long whip of fire which flashed through the air in front of her. She moved it this way and that as her health bar appeared to both their eyes along with a notice message.  This spell took 10 of her health points, which was a worrisome amount considering she only had 100 to start with.

"It's a fire spell," she said, whipping around her hand, then down and around to either side.  "Really useful to cow people, and in close combat, not very draining to keep going either back in our own world.  Not good against magical shields, but it can be used to redirect spells too." As she spoke another status appeared in front of her.

"Would- be dominatrix.  You have discovered a hidden weapons skill dealing with whips and non-solid weaponry.  This will allow you to do more damage with whips or other similar weapons. Beware though, using this technique too often in public will give you a reputation, mostly bad.  -2 to charisma. Can be changed to plus five dealing with certain situations or people who like that kind of thing."

Grumbling, Imoen removed that message, trying not to notice Harry's snickering as she moved on to read the previous message bar.  "A new blood mage spell! Yyou have discovered a new spell that you power with your own blood.  Be warned, such spells are dangerous, and can bring you more attention than you might think they are worth."

"I wonder if I can learn it now," Harry said staring at her.

"I'll teach you what're supposed to be the wand movements, like I just showed you they do translate into hand movements pretty well," Imoen said, flicking her hand around and down then up, whipping the flame whip around.  Then she made it disappear, and instantly got one of her hit points back. "Hhuh, well, that's nice at least. Although, if that spell took out 10, I'm a little concerned about what my other spells might take out of me." *And I don't think I’m going to teach Harry any of my more powerful spells, not yet.*

"Well don't hold out on me," Harry said eagerly, leaning forward eagerly.  "What kind of other spells you have?"

"Why'd you chose the Paladin template if you're that interested in spell work?" Imoen asked, honestly quizzical.  "Was it just the whole wanting to be a knight thing?"

"I chose the Paladin template because I was worried I might have to go solo occasionally., Aand yes, I've always wanted to be a knight in shining armor.  But until I decide what God I will pledge myself to, I can only use lay on hands once a day, although I can use turn undead three times. But once I choose a God, those numbers will go up a bit.  At least I think so. Now come on! Remember what you said before: if you're not cheating, you're not trying."

Imoen nodded and went through what were called the 'Auror's Quartet', the four spells they used the majority of the time.  This was a high-powered trick tripping hex, the spell Stupefy which Harry already knew. The third was an incarceration spell which sounded a lot like the immobilization spell that Hermione had used on Neville, only it was area of affect and actually trussed up the enemy rather than simply immobilizing him.  It was also difficult to dispel once it was on you even if you could point your wand at yourself.  The fourth was a cutting spell, called Reducto, the power of which could be varied to create different effects, and which could cut through almost any substance but which could be blocked, dodged or even shielded against.  "Beyond that, there's about six other combat spells that I know of which I could teach ya that're most useful in combat. I mean, any spells can be useful depending on how you use them, but these're made for combat."

"Like Bombarda?" Harry asked.

"Yeah that's one of them, although we don't usually use that one in combat, since if it hits, it can be lethal at even a low powered level.  There's a few others though I can teach you."

"And I think we need to learn them now, so we know about the cost to our health.  What's your health bar like by the way?"

"150," Harry said.  "I think that the main combat types, Paladin, Ranger, Fighter, Berserker, get added health with every level, and I'm level five, so hundred and fifty."

"Damn," Imoen muttered "Why do I think I got gipped by being a thief?"

"Don't look down on it so much, paladins can't dual class, thieves can.  If you reach level twelve in your thief class, you can start building up a secondary specialty." Harry frowned then.  "Though don't ask me about what that'll do to your thief skills or your ability to wear armor or other restrictions.”

"Well that's interesting, I suppose, but that's for later.  What can I do right now is the question?" Imoen mused.

"Let's go find out," Harry said hopping to his feet as elsewhere the bell for dinner went off.  *Huh, we've been talking for that long?* "Besides, I should show you around after dinner, get you used to this place, and find your room."

The two of them left Harry's room then walked down the corridor towards the stairs that would lead them downward, and then down again towards the refractory.  Those within Candlekeep could either eat inside the main keep, which was always closed to outsiders who had not paid the toll in order to get within, or at the one inn, between the keep and the outer walls.  But most of the Watchers didn't bother with going there, unless they were feeling hungry for something specific. As they went, Harry suddenly winced as he remembered something. “You're about to run into the downside of being in this game."

"What?" Imoen asked, suddenly wary.

"The food."

"You mean how Middle Ages it's going to be? I got used to that kind of thing at Hogwarts, I suppose." Imoen replied.  '"You'd think they'd have learned how to cook muggle dishes, but no, it's all about pandering toa the purebloods, ugh.  I remember being almost to the point where I'd kill for a burger."

"No," Harry said shaking his head.  "I meant, well you'll find out."

As they were walking through the halls of the keep though something else came up.  With night now upon them the halls were lit by torches set in sconces along its length.  But as they passed between them a message appeared in front of her. “You have entered a shadow, would you like to activate Hide in Shadows?”

“Hide in Shadows?” Imoen asked, looking over at Harry.

“Some kind of thief skill., I’d think a very sneaky one by the name,” he supplied.

Nodding, Tonks clicked the yes button, actually pushing her hand out into midair to do it.  Harry had a second to reflect that it would probably take her a while to learn not to do that, when she disappeared for a brief second.  Then she was back, several feet away and scowling at another message. “Technique failed, huh?. Well, it didn’t take any of my health so I suppose it’s a decent enough substitute for a Disillusion spell.  Still feel I got gipped on this whole thief thing though.”

Moments later, Imoen was glaring at him across the table before turning that glare on her food.  "Tasteless slop!" She growled, "Come on, why the heck is it so bland? And it looked pretty good, too."  *Okay, leaving the N-name behind was cool, being around Harry could be fun, but darn it, this is starting to look a lot more like work than I would have liked.”4*

"I don't know," Harry said with a shrug.  "I mean I've seen the cooks at work, I know exactly what the kind of foods we're getting should taste like, but when I actually eat it, there's no taste."

"There goes my theory of us being transported to some other real-world then, maybe," Imoen groused.  "A computer wouldn't be able to handle taste obviously, but if we had been transferred to somewhere else, then we would have that sensation along with everything else." *Although why the heck would I have the sense of touch if I don't get the sense of taste?*

Harry shrugged at that, then gestured down to the food.  "Keep eating though. You'll need your stamina. If you don't eat, your stamina takes a hit and then your strength, dexterity and even agility will soon follow.  Unfortunately, stamina doesn't actually appear in our status bars like health or magical power does, it's more like levels or something rather than a bar you can watch drain."

"That is kind of weird, being able to see how our magic is drained like that," Imoen replied frowning a little.  "But then again, considering that our original world's magics come across as these blood spells, I suppose we don't have room to talk."

"Maybe," Harry said, before pausing and smiling up at a man who came across the room towards them.  "Gorion."

Imoen turned and took in the man at a glance.  *Nice build, decently wide shoulders, the air of an erudite, but the body of a very tough guy.  Damn, he reminds me of my dad almost.* And the silver in his hair did nothing to take away from his appearance, rather it added a certain dignity, speaking of experience.

Gorion nodded back, sitting down across from the two youngsters, smirking at the two of them.  "I take it you two have kissed and made up then from your little spat last night?" he added lightly.

Harry blanched, while Imoen guffawed.  "You might say that." This was odd she thought, meeting Gorion for the first time since according to what Harry had said, this guy had been part of his life since he entered this weird world.  It was somewhat made worse because of the fact that despite being stuck in a tutorial, wheren a single day repeated, he'd become close with Harry. That speaks both of his character, and of Harry's need for someone like this in his life too, Imoen thought grimly.

"Well that's good to know. , Bbut next time, try to keep your roughhousing out of the main library.  The Master Librarian nearly talked my ear off about how you two were disrespecting the library this afternoon," Gorion said teasingly.

"Sorry about that," Harry said with a shrug.  "Imoen here decided to take it upon herself to thwack me one when I told her that she would have to get Madame Barca's permission to come with us, **again**, as if it was my fault.  Then I dragged her off so we could talk about it."

Imoen glared at Harry, smacking him on the shoulder while Gorion chuckled ruefully.  "Yes well, Madame Barca is rather set in her ways," he said delicately. "Still, you've learned quite a lot of from her over the years, so I don't want to hear any disrespect from either of you, is that understood?" He asked, not changing his voice from his mild tone.  But one salt-spotted eyebrow rose, as he stared at them, and both of them nodded with Imoen a tad behind Harry. "Good. And remember Harry, we'll want to be leaving tomorrow."

"Where do you think we'll be going first?" Harry asked, but something in his tone made Imoen look at him curiously.

"I don't know, the Friendly Arm Inn, obviously.  But from there, we could go south or north, depending.  I've heard rumors from a few of the guests, those rich ones who pay their way in.  But Tthere seems to be some kind of iron issue occurring from the mines around Nashkel that could cause large-scale conflict between Baldur's Gate and Amn, maybe even worse.  With that in mind, we might wish to take a boat from Baldur'sboulders Gates, head overseas quickly. While Candlekeep will be sacrosanct in any war, travelers certainly would not be.  And especially someone as young as you. You would be a prime target for conscription my lad."

"Yes, I don't think I'd like to be part of an army," Harry said with a sigh.

"Your inability to take orders rather than instruction would be against you," Gorion said commiseratingly, his eyes twinkling.  He then stood up, patting Harry's hand where ithe lay on the table and then Imoen's. "I'll leave you two to it. You wouldn't want your last meal together be ruined by the presence of an old man after all."

The moment the man was gone, Imoen turned to Harry, one eyebrow raised, and Harry shrugged.  "Like I said, I was pretty much done with the tutorial portion. This is part of it. If I had met Gorion as I had intended to after leaving you behind this afternoon, he and I would already have finished our preparations and left.  That is sort of the same speech he gives me every evening. And tomorrow, tomorrow will start the same way this one did, and I'll be going through things all over again."

Racking her brains to remember what she knew about role-playing games, which she had played the tabletop versions of numerous times, Imoen said thoughtfully "This iron ore issue is probably going to be a main plot line then.  But why the rush?"

Harry winced then filled her in on what the game had told himher duringabout the introduction and why he and Gorion were leaving.

"Yep," Imoen's said with a nod.  "That definitely sounds like a main plot point." Then her eyes narrowed.  "Well, if you think you're leaving me behind Harry Potter, you can think again.  I didn't sneak into the Department of Mysteries and then get myself stuck in this game to be left behind when you go out to adventuring!"

Harry flushed at that, unused to people other than Gorion caring about him.  Well other than Gorion and Hermione and Ron he supposed, but he hadn't thought about either of them since coming to this new world, and they certainly weren't around now.  "Thanks," he muttered, looking away before slowly shaking his head as he turned back to her, his face grim. "But you might not have a choice. Remember what we were talking about?"

"Which part, the part where everyone here would forget everything that's happened today at the stroke of twelve, or the idea that maybe my own actions will be hindered by the game?" Imoen groused.

"Either or," Harry said sadly, shrugging his shoulders.

"We'll cross those bridges when we come to them.  Unless we have to build them. In that case, we'll build those bridges and then cross them.  Okay? I'm not letting you go alone. Set that in stone, Harry."

Another warm flush of pleasure ran through Harry at that, and he smiled.  Perhaps, just perhaps the word relative really didn't mean enemy any longer.  And as he thought that, the relationship status above Imoen's head changed from semi-friendly to that of friendlys.

The two of them sat there as the candles in the dining room were changed about them, talking quietly to one another, exchanging stories.  During this time, Harry had learned that Imoen had dated Charlie Weasley, and that he had broken up with her to head to Bulgaria for the dragons, that and to get away from his mother.  Through Imoen, Harry learned more about the woman who had sent him a Weasley sweater that first Christmas, and of how she wasn't actually all that nice once you got to know her. "Oh, she's a right damn good cook, a fantastic mother for little kiddies I suppose, but that's just it.  She doesn't want the kids to grow up. That's why both Bill and Charlie moved away. Awesome character Bill, I was just a little firstie meself when he was in his seventh year. He was head boy and everything, and just about the coolest guy you could ever meet. Charlie was in his third year of course and looked to be almost as cool as his big brother when he grew up, but he was all about care of magical animals, whereas Bill was runes and spell craft.  Of course, both of 'em were mad for Quidditch."

"That sounds fun.  You know I was..."

"Tthe youngest SeekerWatcher in a century, yeah.  That was pretty awesome, and you were darned good too.  I saw lots of Charlie's games and afterward too. Gryffindor hadn't won a single a game since he left you know."

They were so busy simply getting to know one another that serious discussions had been set by the wayside.  This continued until they were interrupted by a stern voice. Calling out for Imoen's name. "Ah, there you are, Imoen."

Wincing a little, Harry whispered, "That's Madame Barca, your guardian I suppose., Llike Gorion's mine, although I don't know what kind of relationship you have."

She was a stern-faced elderly woman who immediately put Imoen in mind of McGonagall, though her clothing was very different.  It was almost skintight but not quite., Bblack, with a black robe and cloak combination. The hood was pushed back at the moment, letting her face and eyes be seen, behind a small pair of wire glasses, glinting in the light of the candles that were everywhere in this room.  Her face slightly softened as she saw Imoen talking to Harry, but she still shook her head sternly. "If you think I'm going to let you miss a full day and evening of classes just because your friend is going to leave soon, you have another thing coming. Now get up, we have work to do."

'Huh, but I," Imoen began, only to yelp as the woman's hand flashed out faster than Imoen could dodge, grabbing ain year and pulling her out of her chair.  "Get a move on! If you can't dodge that, it's obvious you need to work on your hand eye coordination more."

"Ouch," Harry muttered, watching the two of them go.  He hadn't interacted much with Madame Barca in his time in the tutorials, and that bit of interaction told him he didn't really want to.

But now on his own, he sat for a moment, frowning as he looked out into the darkness of the night beyond one of the windows of the dining hall, scowling.  He was almost tempted to go to bed early to see what would happen. *But would that force Imoen to go to bed too? Or would it just leave her high and dry until twelve o'clock came around?"*

Sighing Harry frowned thinking about what he could do with his time, and then shrugged, and headed off to the library.  With nothing else to do, he could at least read more about the background of this world in history. He had already read a lot about that, but there was always more to learn.  This actually helped greatly, since Harry got so into the history book he was reading about one of the Elvish and Draugr wars that he didn't noticeknow time passing, until his door opened slowly.  He looked up and watched as Imoen slunk in, closing it silently be behind her. "Harry?"

Setting his book aside Harry beamed a smile at her, happy to see her.  "Were you able to get away from Madame Barca thenm?"

"She kept me up until about 30 minutes ago, then sent me to bed, but I decided I'd rather come and see you.  She said it was pushing the 12th candle, which I assume means 12 o'clock?" Imoen asked, moving over to lay out on his bed groaning.  "Bloody freaking taskmistress, gah, makes me long for days of Moody's training, and that's just wrong."

"They use candle lengths to tell time here, yes," Harry said with a nod.  They have clocks, that one big one in the library anyway, but no watches or anything of that nature.  Although I don't know why, I read that these other races, gnomes and dwarves, are very good at that kind of thing.  Maybe they just haven't been able to spread them very far or something?"

"I doubt it’s that.  There's a big difference between being able to tell time and being able to build a watch.  It's all about miniaturizing things I think. And making them really, you know fit together, properly," Imoen said thoughtfully.  "At least, that's what I can remember."

Harry raised an eyebrow at her and she shrugged.  "I once smashed open my dad's watch to see how it worked, if the inside of it matched those of magical watches.  Boy was I surprised. Twice over,." she finished ruefully. "He spanked my rear for that one, only time he ever did that kind of thing, too.  Turns out the watch was really expensive, unfortunately."

Harry chuckled at that, but it was a little forced.  "Really, my uncles never really did that kind of thing with me, although when I was younger, he did beat me for getting better grades thanin my cousin.  I got the message quickly enough after that, though. And of course, my aunt punished me if the meals weren't to her liking or not ready on time."

Imoen winced.  "Um, you want to tell me more about them?"

"Why bother until I know you won't forget in the morning?" Harry asked wanly, shaking his head.  "It's, that's not the kind of thing I'd, I'd want to go over more than once."

Imoen winced at that, but nodded.  "How much time do you think we have left?"

Harry shrugged.  "No idea., Nnot long, I don't think."

"So tell me more about this Gamer thing then.  Let's not get into anything personal now, tell me more about how the game works.  In fact, I have a specific question." Imoen said with her own forced cheer. "This is supposed to be a role-playing game, and all those have a lot of combat to them, so tell me how combat works."

Harry nodded, and slowly began to tell her about what he had learned so far about how combat worked, how the skill slots worked with the weapons.  He showed her the weapons he had in her his item box and Imoen took them one after another putting them in her own, saying as an aside that "Doing that will help me figure out how much I can carry." The truth was, that she could carry up to 65 pounds., Aan okay amount, for a girl so slight looking, but not a candle to what she should have been able to do.  "With my morphing powers, I could create muscle, and harden in my bones, and be able to lift like a weightlifter."

She was in the process of handing the weapons back to him after trying out each one in turn, figuring out which she preferred and which she couldn't even lift, when it happened.

One moment the two of them were looking at one another as Harry held out his hand for a war hammer and the next Harry found himself left in his bed with the sheets up to his neck again, and the words 'you have slept in your bed, health and mana points are fully restored and all spells in a wizard or mage's spell book have been refilled.'

Imoen was nowhere to be found as Harry looked around wildly, almost startling Gorion as he had just opened the door.  "Easy there, lad. Did you have a bad dream again?"

"I..." Harry paused, then nodded his head slowly.  He had tried to talk to Gorion about the Gamer aspects, and while Gorion knew about levels and such, he hadn't seemed to understand at all what Harry meant about redoing the same day.  At one point he just ignored it when Harry brought it up directly and that made Harry forget all about telling him more. "Yes, I did. There was something chasing me, some kind of presence maybe?" He said, prevaricating quickly.  This was something he had gotten used to early on here, and it served him well again as did his Charisma points.

'You have passed a charisma spot check," said a little status bar to one side.  "Your tale has been believed. Use this power wisely."

Harry rolled his eyes at that, but did so quickly as he turned away to grab up a shirt that Gorion wasn't aware of them.

"Yes, I'm afraid that kind of fits.  Don't worry about it Harry," Gorion said slowly, looking at the younger man thoughtfully.  "Many people have these semi-precognitive dreams, and given what I've been telling you of late about our leaving, it's no wonder that you have bad dreams.  Do you think you will be able to leave today? Oh, and Imoen said that she is a little angry at you, for leaving her with the dishes last night."

Harry chuckled wanly at that.  "I suppose I should go and apologize then, although to be fair, she's never around when it's our time to actually work in the kitchen before meals."

"Truly, and would you want her there? I remember the time she tried to make that Sea bass dish, and she couldn't quite get the heat on the Sea bass correct all the way through, one portion was raw the other nearly charred black.  And she somehow set water on fire somehow."

Again Harry let loose a chuckle and a nod, trying to indicate that he knew what Gorion was talking about, although of course he didn't, not having heard that story before.  "Still, I'll go in search for her before I report for my lessons this afternoon."

"You have time, but only slightly.  I would hurry if that is your plan," Gorion said with a nod.  "And if you do decide that you're ready to leave, come find me in the courtyard by the inn.  I'll be there talking to master Belasco about our supplies."

Harry nodded back, and the two men separated outside his room.  Harry waited and until Gorion was out of sight, then looking at his map, try to figure out where Imoen's room was.  Once he knew that, he turned and raced through the halls in such a way that if he had seen any Watchers in this area at this point of day it would've caused many a shout of anger.  As it was though no one witnessed his mad flight, or his desperate, fearful and yet hopeful expression.

He hadn't even covered half the distance but as he turned a corner, he ran solidly into another body.  Harry fell backwards, with the other person on top of him, slamming his back and head onto the rock of the corridor below.  He had a moment to see a message box. 'Ouch. You have run into someone pell-mell, and been dumped on your ass. -2 to health.'

Rolling his eyes, he clicked that screen off, then looked down at whoever had run into them.  "Oh good grief, I'm sorry but..." he looked, and stopped, staring at Imoen as she pushed herself off his chest, having somehow taken the larger and far heavier Harry off his feet in her own mad rush.  "Uh, Imoen? Are you..."

"I'm in here," she said grinning up at him, and hugging him tightly, before hopping to her feet, pulling the larger Harry to his, almost stumbling in her efforts until Harry stood up on his own.  "I'm here, and I remember everything we talked about yesterday. So it looks as if, even if I'm not the player, I can remember things done in this tutorial thing from one day to the next."

"Awesome," Harry said with a sigh, smiling gleefully.

"Yeah awesome, but look, I just snuck out of reading lessons of all things with Madame Barca, and I need to get back there before she looks for me.  Hopefully I can get out of them from now on, though I don't think much about Imoen, living in this huge library and still needing reading lessons. "How do you spend your day?"

Harry recited what he normally did, but then added, "But at this point, I'm not getting anything out of it.  I've stopped getting experience points from sparring, or even doing any of the quests. All I can do is get materials, which is good I suppose, I've got a lot of those jewels, more than enough for a war chest or whatever, and a lot of weapons two, but still I don't get a lot out of staying within this tutorial area any longer."

"Is there anything you haven't tried?"

Harry frowned thinking.  "I haven't tried to get outs of the castle, I don't think it's honestly possible.  I haven't actually entered the Inn, because I think that will make the main quest activate since Gorion has pointed me in that direction a few times as where we'll need to pick up supplies.

"Then let's stay away from that for now.  You might be used to this game world, but I sure as hell ain't.  So how about this. It's obvious I've got stuff I need to do, tell me about the quests you think I could do instead of you, and maybe we'll see if I can get some experience from them."

"What does Madame Barca have you doing?"

"She has me practicing lock picking, scouting, hide in shadows, which is just awesome from the few times I've been able to do it.  Setting and disarming traps and reading, a lot of reading."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Harry said slowly.

"Well it wouldn't to you, now would it?" Imoen groused.  "Like I said, hopefully I can get out of those lessons. Ugh, I had enough of those kind of lessons from Magic of History and Defense of the Dark Arts."

"No listen," Harry said quickly.  "The more you know about the world around you, the greater your wisdom points.  The more you understand, the greater your intelligence. Both of those are really important, they impact your ability to protect yourself from mind magics, and a few other things like barter and stuff like that."

"Barter?"

"It's a small skill that activates when you try to buy or sell something.  It did to me once when I tried to sell off one of the gems I was getting from mistress Phyldia since I didn't know how much they were worth," Harry said, shrugging his shoulders.  "I think everyone has that kind of thing."

"Okay but that's a normal skill to have then," she held up her hand as Harry made to speak.  "I mean it is something that I doubt would be in the regular game. I've played RPGs before this and most of them don't go into that kind of minute detail, like barter level two or something."

"So you're saying I should look around for other skills to add? Skills that wouldn't necessarily be important in normal RPGs but which would help us going forward?”

"I think so yeah," Imoen said with a nod.  "I mean, have you actually tried cooking on your own?"

"No, I mean the food so awful here, why would I try? And whenever I go into the kitchen, I just help everyone else there, I don't cook on my own."

"Do it Harry," Imoen said firmly.  "I think there's more to this game thing, and more to skills than you've figured out just yet."

"Okay, but in return, I want you to train me up in those spells of yours."

"You've got a deal, Harry," Imoen said with a nod, shaking his hand.  "We'll meet up for a late lunch, and we'll spend the rest of the day together going over stuff like that and figuring out what I can and can't do.  We should also go over combat, maybe even spar together," she went on her Auror side coming out as she began to pace along the corridor, five paces to one side of Harry, five the other.  "I'll need to figure out how different it is, I know you're used to it but I'm not. Furthermore, perhaps my own skill set will help you learn more than just fighting the same opponent every day, to say nothing of me needing to start thinking like a thief in a fight rather than a witch.  With the hit my health points take with our blood spells they can't be my first recourse."

That made a lot of sense to Harry, and he nodded.  "Just remember, follow the little red dot when you want to attack, although even finding out if you see the red dot or not should be interesting."

It turned out that while she did see the red dot Harry did in hand to hand combat, Imoen had none of the skills that Harry had in swords or anything else beyond the short sword, and even in that she only had a basic understanding, or one point used on the skill.  She did seem to have a natural dexterity that was nearly equal to his own, and her agility was astonishing. This last point led to their greatest surprise since Imoen' soul had been transposed into Imoen's body.

"What the heck!?" Imoen said as she flipped and rolled away from a blow from Harry.  Harry immediately backed up, looking at her quizzically and then up at the status screen that both of them could see.

"Fight like a Jackrabbit.  Due to your inherent agility, you can fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee, +10 to Evasion, plus 5 to Strength."

Is that an active or passive skill" Imoen said, staring at the message avidly, completely delighted.

"Passive, active?" Harry repeated blankly.

With a sigh, Imoen talked about what that meant, explaining in an RPG terms.  A passive skill was something that added to your basic stats, like Harry's 'Potter Luck' which was always acting in the background passively.  An active skill was something he could activate, sometimes using it over a set amount of time, like Harry's Turn Undead paladin skill. Imoen's skill was quickly proven to be a mix of the two types.  She couldn't activate it, but it started up on its own when in combat, and stayed active for a set amount of time.

"That's incredible!" Harry said excitedly.  "I wonder if I can learn something like that?"

“Maybe, or maybe it's a specialty skill Imoen developed before I came along.  I doubt you'd get the same thing." Imoen cautioned. "Besides, given your ability to use armor, you wouldn't need to dodge as much as I do, since I'll only be wearing leather or light chain mail." She scowled.  "If Miss Noodle Arm's body could even handle that. She should've really eaten more Wheaties you know?"

After they were washing up, wiping away the sweat from their faces, Imoen asked, "So, how did cooking go?"

"Oddly enough, pretty good.  I was able to make the bread taste like well regular bread should, so I don't know, it's kind of interesting.  It turns out that cooking is just another skill here. I can use my previous knowledge of it to help me raise my basic skill pretty quickly I think." Harry replied.  "I'd never even thought about trying to cook something for myself, everything had been so bland and uninteresting that I didn't think we could do anything about it. It even becomes a new skill, Master Chef, but it's not like my combat skills, it's more like an ability, one that needs to be worked at and raised."

"Excellent!" Imoen said with a nod.  "I was able to do those quests you told me about, finding Mistress Phlydia's book, that kind of thing, and get some experience out of it.  Not a lot, 250, does that match with what you got?"

"It does.  I think that is sort of the norm for quests like that, two hundred or thereabouts for small time stuff, a thousand for more involved quests, with anything above that being extreme but not impossible, Harry said, tossing the rag he had been using to clear his face away.  Fighting Imoen was tougher than fighting arms master, not because of any lack of skill in the arms master's skill, but because Imoen was faster, and far more active than the older man. "Now, let's test out that mage of the blood stuff. And by the way, did you get that restriction, that you can no longer dual class is a mage?"

"Mage yes, but I wonder if that means I can't dual class as a wizard," Imoen replied.  "But you're right, it's time for your instructions in wizard-type warfare." Honestly given her original ability and experience, Imoen/Imoen had thought she'd be able to beat Harry with relative ease, but she had been surprised by his skill and fighting ability.  Let's find a deserted spot and start testing stuff."

By the end of the day, Harry had added a few more spells to his own 'spell book', and had walked Imoen through basically hanging the spells to one side of her mind, and then casting them with a single gesture, rather than going through all the ridiculous hand movements that she had been using the evening before.  She had a vast repertoire of spells however, both specific to combat and others that weren't meant for that but could still be used as such.

Yet at the same time, they found out that the cost was worse for some reason.  The Stupefy spell for her took ten health, whereas it took twenty from Harry. They supposed that that was a class thing too, although why the difference was so high, Harry didn't know.  "I'd bet it could be because Imoen was once being trained as a mage," Harry said slowly. "She had the training for a bit, but then she decided being a thief was more fun than being a wizard so changed her base class.  I think Madame Barca convinced her of something too, since she's a dual class thief/mage herself."

"Jeez, it feels weird to hear things like that about the body I'm now inhabiting when I don't remember it.  Well, whatever the case on why it costs you more to cast ‘em, you've done great Harry," Imoen said. "You were able to add those three spells to your repertoire faster than I expected if I'm honest.  Those are seventh level spells, and you are only going into your second year. Now admittedly, you've got this new, adult body to play with but still, your ability to use spells like that tells me how good a student you are."

"And your teaching ability," Harry said ruefully.  You definitely blow Professor Quirell out of the water in a single day compared to what he could teach us in a year.  And that's without the whole attempting to kill me thing."

Imoen blinked.  "...the what? You mean those rumors about you and him having some kind of epic duel and him dying were real!? You dog, you didn't mention that last night in your stories!" She quipped, smacking her fist lightly on his shoulder.  He flinched slightly, and she frowned. Harry definitely did not take joshing around physically like that very well. He wasn't used to it, but Imoen was determined to get him used to that, and physical affection from a family member, very quickly.  "You'll have to tell me about it over dinner. For now, do you think you found enough other things to concentrate on that you can put up with me wanting to spend a few days maybe even a few weeks in this tutorial thing?"

Harry winced.  "Um, I suppose if we can continue training at night, that would be fine.  But I didn't really find anything else to add to my skills. I can't raise my combat skills further without actual experience to level up my base level and there aren't any more quests here.  Cooking is... okay and is a great thing to experiment with. But it won't keep my attention for days on end."

"What about relationships," Imoen said, waggling her eyebrows outrageously.  "That barmaid of yours, or Mistress Phlydia."

Harry blushed, looking away.  "I've tried to, well, you I told you that I..."

"Yeah, you told me that you raised their relationship status with you to 'interested in you' a time or two, and then stopped.  Can you raise it further, is there anything you'll get out of it? You said you got a plus one to your charisma, what does charisma do beyond the obvious?"

Harry explained how charisma helped you convince people you were telling the truth, general handsomeness which impacted how people dealt with you in a lot of social situations, and how it directly impacted the barter ability and she nodded slowly.  "Okay, so charisma actually will matter when we're out and about. What is your charisma at this point?"

"Fifteen." Harry replied.

"Is that high or low?"

"I don't know,” Harry said shrugging his shoulders, looking uncomfortable.  "But are we really talking about me doing this? I mean didn't you say..."

"Harry, I said that manipulating offense so you could sleep with a girl and she wouldn't remember it the next day is wrong," Imoen interjected.  "But I didn't say anything about you using this day just to get close to the girls, did I? There's a difference between being manipulative, and simply making up for lost time.  You're 18, you've known at least this bar girl for years now, right? Your character has I mean."

Harry nodded hesitantly.

"In that case, you're just making up for lost time like I said.  As long as you don't let it go too far. Simply talk to the girl and when it comes to kissing tell her or Mistress Phlydia," if you go that route she said teasingly winking at Harry, who blushed rosily under her gaze.  She knew that Harry actually found Phlydia more attractive than the bar girl. *Not that I can see it, that bar girl has a spanking pair of knockers.*Imoen thought, somewhat jealously as she looked down at her barely A-cup chest.  *On the other hand, maybe Harry just has a thing for brainy girls? Or older women? It will be fun to find out which.*"Whoever it is, just tell them that you're in it for fun, that you don't want to go too far.  I bet they'll be very thankful for that, considering that I don't think this world has any kind of contraceptive spell or condoms."

"What are condoms? I've never heard the name before.  I know what a contraception spell would be anyway. The name is sort of descriptive." Harry said, blushing yet quizzical.

"A condom is this rubber balloon thing that muggles put over the chap's wedding tackle in order to catch his ...  emissions," Imoen said, grinning as Harry became more flushed with every word. "Am I embarrassing you enough now?  I could go on. I hear they’ve started to experiment with giving ‘em flavors somehow."

"What is this a contest or something?" Harry groused.

"I'm an older female family member Harry," Imoen said, watching as Harry twitched at the word family but going on smoothly.  "It's part of my job description to embarrass you. Just be thankful I'm not doing it in front of anyone else."

"Oh yes I'm so thankful for that," Harry grumbled.  He looked away for a moment, then back to Imoen, his face still flushed at the idea of what they were talking about and yet also thoughtful.  "But you really think that there'd be an upshot to me doing this?"

"I think so Harry," she said with a nod.  Then she sighed and looked around them gesturing around at the world.  "Look, your ability to cook things that can actually taste to our senses, that tells me something else is going on here.  That computer didn't transport you into a world created, it transported you to another world entirely. One where the there is a layer of Game System or whatever, or else Gorion and Madame Barca wouldn't know anything about that kind of thing, which they do.  That means we might be here for a lot longer than I had thought."

"You mean like the rest of our lives?" Harry asked.  He was actually kind of pleased about that. It wasn't as if he had much of a life back home anyway, and beyond Hermione and Ron, who hadn't been talking to him that summer anyway, making him wonder about their friendship, he doubted anyone would miss him.  And he certainly wouldn't miss being back there with his relatives, wondering why Dumbledore wanted him there, and was so interested in his alive, but not well. And this world, well it called out to the explorer in him. It was so much bigger so much wider than the world he had begun to know in the magical world.

"Yeah," Imoen said with a sigh.  She could tell that Harry was kind of happy about that, but she was quite ambivalent about it.  She had friends back home, a family that loved her, that would no doubt miss her. Which is everything that Harry doesn't have back there, at least according to him.  Though I do wonder why his two friends cut off contact with him.

"So like I said, I think that adding to our ability to live here, to your ability to interact with other people, that's a good thing in the long run.  And besides that, this whole relationship thing, it's got to mean more than we've discovered so far. Even taking into account your little bump in charisma for getting the barmaid interested in you." She laughed then, shaking her head.  "Didn't the game itself tell you something about that?"

"No, it told me not to get a swelled head because Cassandra's only a barmaid, though I still don't know what that means, or what rumor says about them." At Harry's words Imoen had to bite her lip to keep from laughing, but she was just successful enough to let Harry continue.  "Alright, I suppose we can try this." Then he smirked at her. "So long as you agree to be my guinea pig in terms of my cooking skills anyway."

"Deal," Imoen said, holding out a hand to them.  They shock, and then began to create what would be at their schedule for the rest of the time in the tutorial.

**OOOOOOO**

Hermione frowned, staring up in the sky before sighing and heading back inside disconsolately.  Her mother saw her coming and raised an eyebrow. "Another day without a message from your friends, Hermione?" she asked solicitously.

The younger brunette nodded, staring at her mother, who shared her own wild, wavy hair, although hers were a light blonde color, whereas Hermione had gotten her hair color from her father.  "Yes mum. I could almost think that Ronald at least has simply forgotten, that would be in keeping with his general personality," she huffed, before going on almost plaintively. "But Harry? He and I promised to contact one another as often as we could this summer, and not only has he not tried to initiate any contact, he hasn't followed up on any of the messages I sent to him! Not even my questions about his homework."

Chuckling a little at how affronted her daughter sounded at that last point, Dr.  Granger leaned back and scratched at the tip of her nose for a moment, a habitual sign that she was thinking.  "Ronald was the one who contacted you those first few weeks I believe?"

"Right, and then he slowly started to stop.  It got to the point where I stopped sending him messages at all either.  But I've kept trying to send messages to Harry, and he hasn't been responding at all!" Hermione scowled actually stamping her foot in frustration.  "I hate this! I don't like being cut off at all from the rest of the wizarding world, and especially my friends. Especially Harry, I, I'm worried," she paused, looking a little guilty even as she said that.

This wasn't the first time Hermione had broken off talking about Harry, and her mother, whose first name was Emma, had decided she'd had enough.  "Hermione," she said firmly, "there's something about Harry that you're not telling me. This isn't 'a daddy get your dental drill' thing either, it's something entirely different.  Some secret and I don't mean that drivel about how he's the Boy Who Lived, I know you well enough to know that you wouldn't care one way or the other about that after meeting him and finding he's so unlike what the books say." The gentle teasing tone caused her daughter to flush, but she didn't let up.  "So, talk."

"It's just well...  okay those stories are part of it," Hermione grumbled.  "I don't think he's seen any royalties from them, and more generally speaking, he, well, while his robes were good, he didn't wear anything else that looked like they fit.  They looked like very nasty hand-me-downs, kind of like uncle Frederick's that daddy tried to wear that one time."

Wincing at the idea of a young boy wearing such obese clothing, her mother made a humming noise, indicating Hermione should go on.

"There's the way he kind of flinched away when I tried to hug him, I, I don't know what to make of that.  And I**know** he's smarter than he lets on!" Hermione finally shouted, as if she'd been keeping that in for a while.  "He's always one of the first to pick up spells, and he can even describe them to other people easily. But his writing is so horrible! And I know I've caught him at least a few times trying to, to dumb down what he's doing in terms of his essays."

"And then there's the attention he sometimes gets.  A lot of the times he seems to just want to hide. I don't know what it all means, but it's very worrisome.  And he doesn't ever talk about his home life, ever. I've told them about you and daddy, I've heard a lot about Ronald's family, his brothers, his parents, I've even heard about some of our other friend's family's occasionally.  But Harry's never told us anything other than the names of his relatives, and that they don't like magic. That's why I was so interested in keeping contact with them this summer, I thought he might appreciate having someone to talk to." Hermione finished, frowning in worry.

"I see," Dr.  Granger said thoughtfully.  So, possible neglect at the very least, certainly apathy and disdain.  "And you keep on going to the alley to use one of the owls from the Owl Post there, correct? Have you tried any other means of contacting them? Such as looking him up in the phone book?”

Hermione blinked, then shook her head.  "I don't think that would work. He told me that there's some kind of protection on his house to keep people from finding it."

"Yes, but you've also told me that magicals lack a certain logic? So perhaps if you use entirely non-magical means, you might have better luck."

With a smile appearing on her face at that bit of forward thinking, Hermione nodded and was about to race off to find the yellow book, when there was a flutter of wings to one side.  Emma turned as her daughter did and gasped in delight and wonder. "My word! That is the most beautiful bird I've ever seen."

The snowy owl now perched on the windowsill preened a little as if she understood what Emma had said, looking at her in favor, before turning her attention towards Hermione.  Her eyes almost narrowed, before she stuck out in a foot holding a message.

Hermione hesitantly reached for it, nodding at Hedwig.  "Thank you, Hedwig, um, we have some bacon for you somewhere, just let me read this first." Moments later she was shaking her head, nibbling her bottom lip worriedly.  "Oh Harry, what have you gotten yourself into now?"

**OOOOOOO**

Harry got up, and talked to Gorion for a while, then gestured to his face, "I'll need to go and shave and shower though before I meet with the Master of Arms." Like Harry had known this would let him start the interaction with Cassandra in the baths.

As before he flirted with her to the best of his slowly growing ability in that area from within the basin.  He once more got to the part where she said she would see him when Harry dropped some chopped wood off at the inn, but this time instead of agreeing, Harry caught her hand, slowly working his thumb along the back of her hand before slowly raising it to his lips kissing it gently, "So what if I said I wanted a bit more than just a discount on beer?"

Cassandra giggled, shaking her head.  "Heh, what kind of girl do you think I am, Harry?”  She waited a heartbeat to see if Harry would say anything and when he didn’t, she went on still teasingly.  “Besides do you think your vows would take it if I responded in kind?" She asked, licking her lips and looking Harry up and down again.

"I, \*gulp\* I'm not talking about anything like that.  Just, maybe having a picnic between ourselves, or, or simply walking around the castle together?" Harry asked, his newfound ease with flirting disappearing now that he had to talk about more important things than simple physical attraction.

but to his surprise, Cassandra actually blushed at that, looking completely nonplussed at the idea of actual romance rather than just a roll in the hay.  "Just for fun, right? I, I mean..."

Blinking, Harry slowly nodded, and feeling a bit bolder, went on.  "You know I, Gorion and I are going on a journey soon. So, whatever happens, it can't be anything serious."

"Good," Cassandra said firmly.  "I'm not interested in anything serious either Harry.  Maybe if you were going to become a Watcher yourself, or Master at Arms to the keep that'd be different, but you're not.  You're an adventurer, I've seen your type come and go, and I'm not going to pine after you or anything like that. But... if you stop by the inn's backyard as I asked and cut us some wood for the rest of the week, well, we'll have to see."

Harry nodded and released her hand.  Cassandra smirked at him before leaning down over the basin and kissing him on the cheek right next to his mouth.  "I'll see you then Harry," she said, her voice turning throaty somehow, before she turned and swished out of the room.

As she did so she moved her hips in such a way that it mesmerized Harry, swishing from one side to another.  The effect was so great he had to ask Imoen later, "how do women do that?"

"Do what?" Imoen asked, as she grimaced at the taste of the soup Harry had made.  "It wasn't very good, very bland frankly, and what chicken taste she was getting was most distinctly burned.

Looking at her face Harry grumbled, and shook his head.  Back to the drawing board on that. And I meant how do you girls swish your hips? It's like, almost like, well hypnotic almost."

"It's a secret magic every girl has, if I tried to explain it to you, I'd have to kill you afterwards," Imoen replied with a grin.

Harry laughed.  "Well we wouldn't want that would we?"

Over the next few days, the two of them spent the lunch and most of the afternoon getting to know one another.  This was a very slow, stilted process since even though he was helping the pink-haired girl, Harry was still hurt by her admission that as Tonks she hadn’t approached him despite knowing they were related.  He was also a private individual, and so didn’t share much of anything about his life back in their old dimension with Imoen.

For her part, Imoen recognized that, setting aside her Tonks name entirely, and decided not to push, instead simply observing Harry and willing to listen to whatever he was willing to tell her.  She saw how occasionally he went from confident and acting his body’s age at times to not in others. It was as if Harry in many ways didn’t know what he was, an 18-year-old trained warrior, or a twelve-year-old who had seen too much in the way of hardship and pain in his young life.  Regardless, those moments of confusion were slowly fading away, indeed they were doing so a hell of a lot faster than they should in Imoen’s opinion. She could almost see Harry setting aside what remained of his childhood as the days passed by.

Emotionally though there were still signs of his inner youth.  Girls in particular seemed to be confusing to him. It was evident he had discovered how to treat each of the girls who showed interest in him, but he didn’t know why they wanted to be treated that way.  So besides pushing him to figure out this relationship stuff, Imoen took it upon herself to tell him a bit about girls: the types of girls he would meet, how to spot a high maintenance girl, a girl who was only out for herself, and the types of relationships that he could form, as well as how to spot if he was becoming emotionally attached to a girl or vice-versa and if that was a bad thing.

This took several days, but when she was running out of things to teach Ranma about girls in general, Imoen and Harry received a surprise in the form of a stat boost for each of them.  Harry’s read “Now was that so hard? Thanks to the hard work of your cousin Imoen/Tonks, you have discovered a bit about how women think and that all women are not created equal as well as what to look for and what to watch out for.  +1 to Wisdom.”

At the same time, Imoen’s read “Congratulations, through perseverance and putting into words things you, as a woman, have always instinctually known, you have forced information through the minds of a 12-turned-18-year-old boy, a feat worthy of the god.  +1 to Intelligence.”

It wasn’t the first stat bonus Imoen had seen.  She’d gotten a few such message by reading the information books and going to classes with Barca.  Although helpful the stats hadn’t amounted to much, several to Wisdom, two to Constitution, and one to Dexterity.  And that had been at the start. After the first few days she hadn’t seen any, and Imoen was very pleased to see this one now. It gave her hope that in the future she could find more, if not during the tutorial, then out in the real world.

Dismissing the message, she turned to Harry and found him staring at his own message.  “What’s wrong Harry?”

“I, you, you weren’t doing this just to tease me?  You…” harry trailed off staring at Tonks then the message.

Moving around Harry to read over his shoulder, Imoen smirked, then put her arms around Harry’s shoulders.  “Well, for one thing, yeah teasing you is fun, but I did really also want to help you. As for that message, course I consider you family ya big lug.  I’m just sorry my own fears made me not reach out to you when I could have. But now that we’re here, I’m going to do my bloody damn best by you Harry.”

Hesitantly Harry reached up and put his arms around Tonks’s in turn.  Above her, the relationship turned from friendly, to friends.  Imoen noticed this and smiled.  It would take a bit, but they’d become family in the end, she was sure of it.

Beyond helping Harry further acclimatize to his enhanced age and girls, Imoen also got to grips with her thieving.  She learned how to hide in the shadows, set traps, find traps and pick pocket which was just fun. More than once Harry found himself light a few coins or gems, with her walking away whistling jauntily.  The two personalities of Imoen and Imoen had merged a little too well in his opinion. Still, she was a delight to be around, and having someone else around who remembered what happened the day before, was utterly fantastic.

This helps offset the hurt that Harry felt when he started to flirt more purposefully with Cassandra and ran into her not remembering what happened the day before once more.  It took seven iterations of flirting with the free-spirited barmaid before Harry could stop making a fool of himself on their little dates, either by coming on a little too strong, or by turning into a stuttering mess when it got to the point where she was more interested than then amused by his flirtations.  For the first few times, she had simply been manipulating him in a way, or at least not making or not taking him very seriously, and Harry had paid for it, in the form of gems and gold and even some embarrassment.

That however served to spur Harry on further and he continued to try to raise their relationship status.  Eventually it paid off, and one day Imoen looked up from where she had been sitting in what had become their normal evening meeting place, a small out of the way tree in the inner environs of the castle near its orchards but not part of them.  She smiled, but her smile segued into a bit of a smirk, as she leaned back and crossed her arms under her all-too-petite chest, crossing her legs and leaning back against the tree as she stared at Harry. "I take it your date went well?"

"Kissing is great," Harry replied, his eyes wide and unseeing.

"Yeah it is, if you do it well.  I take it Cassandra can?" Imoen asked, trying not to laugh.  But when Harry simply replied by another kissing is great line as he stumbled forward, tripping over a tree root, she lost it, and began to laugh loudly, shaking her head.  When she recovered, she asked teasingly, "And did this lead you to a new skill?"

Harry blinked, then opening his status screen for a moment, perusing it quickly.  "I don't think so, I mean, why would kissing... Then he frowned as he read a new skill added in among his others.  "Perception?"

He clicked on it, and read the description allowed.  "Through your due diligence in interaction with those of the female persuasion, you have unlocked an advanced skill, Perception! This skill will allow you to read your fellow men to a large degree, the degree of which you can do so will be prevalent upon your skill with this particular talent.  It can allow you to tell if someone is lying, someone is interested in you, what that could mean, or if your actions please or displease an individual... Needless to say, this skill can be used in many different areas of life."

"Wow," he mused before reading on.  "'Ties into your combat ability, crowd watching skill and ascertain.' I understand the first two, but not the last one."

Smirking now in victory, she had been right that there was a reason for Harry to pursue relationships even in this tutorial, Imoen smiled at him.  "My young padawan, you have much to learn. Crowd watching, that's sort of an interesting ability that a lot of policemen have. It helps you to spot people who are a danger to the themselves or those around them, and who might break in violence at any moment.  You can spot thieves, rogues, at their jobs. Maybe even someone who is using hide in shadows eventually and of course if you’re looking for a specific person it becomes much easier. As for the last one, I'd wager that has something to do with spotting whether or not gems are real or something like that."

"Bloody Brilliant! I can see how all of those would be useful.  But why the heck was it tied into a relationship and my, my learning how to kiss?"

Because relationships are easier than any of the rest of that stuff in many ways and reading body language is a big part of perception," Imoen said with a nod.  "It makes sense."

"Yeah maybe to you.  Not to me," Harry groused.

Imoen smiled, pulling Harry down to sit next to her, and putting an arm over his broad shoulders.  "Now come on, was it all that... hard?"

"Yes!" Harry groused not acknowledging the joke she's made out of that last word.  "I still have no idea why she responded better to my saying that I found her eyes prettier than her hair, or why she responded better to me when I bent over to cut the logs rather than faced her as I did it flexing my arms.  I thought that you know showing off my chest would be a good idea but no."

"Well some girls like a tight arse just like many a man, who knows, its awful hard to spot that kind of thing.  As for the eye and hair, that's simpler. Hair is easy to see and comment on, but eyes are different, they're harder to remember, and of course, they are called the windows to the soul for a reason." Imoen elaborated.

"But, but when I just tried to comment about how she was probably a good person on underneath her beauty, she seems to think I was lying," Harry said, looking a little distraught at the idea.

"That was probably down to your wording Harry.  And the timing. And the individual," Imoen added after second.  "Cassandra isn't looking for you to fall in love with her, she isn't looking to have a permanent relationship, heck the bargirl told you that herself.  So, Cassandra might have been scared off a little. She might indeed have thought you were taking the mickey, making fun of her you know?" Imoen waved her hand airily.  "The point is, all women are different, you can't woo them all of them in the same manner, and you can't trot out any of those old hoary lines about inner beauty or some such unless it's at the appropriate time, and she's the one that brings up whether or not you'd like her for her body, or her personality."

"Why in the heck isn't there a book on this kind of thing?" Harry grumbled.  "And do you really think it's worth the effort here? In the tutorial phase I mean. I'm a little leery about trying to get further with Cassandra at this point." He added, now sounding worried.  "We're really brushing up on that part where it begins to get less about making up for lost time, and more about manipulation."

"Then stop," Imoen said simply.  "You can switch to flirting with Mistress Phlydia if it's starting to bother you with Cassandra.  As for there not being a book about this kind of thing, that's what society is supposed to teach you, Harry.  You're supposed to learn from your, well from **me**," she said smacking her chest while she skirted around the use of the word family or the even more incendiary word relative.  "There are a lot of unwritten rules about interacting with girls and girls interacting with boys, and most of them have to do with how society perceives that kind of thing.  For example, the Muggles back home are much more liberal about how long a couple can date than the wizarding society is. You can get away with dressing differently, you can get away with dating for a lot longer.  Yet at the same time, the idea of a girl asking a boy out would be seen as kind of odd in the muggle world. Whereas in the wizarding world, you could get away with that. Our clothing is far more conservative, but there's a lot more equality between the sexes in the wizarding world."

"And here?" Harry asked pointedly, gesturing around them.

"Medieval times Harry," Imoen said thoughtfully.  "That means only the middle class really have dates as we would understand the term, although they would probably call it courtship regardless of the class.  I would assume that nobles and royalty all can have arranged relationships, which is pure crap in my opinion. You know my why my mother had to run away to marry my father.  The lower class, girls like your Cassandra.

She paused as Harry seemed to bristle, and she held up a hand hurriedly.  "I'm not saying she's a hick or that there's anything wrong with that, I'm just saying she's a peasant, someone who wasn't born into wealth, or into any kind of high society that's all.  Girls like her, well, their experiences and prospects can vary wildly. And those prospects will have to color how you act towards them and vice-versa, because for that class of girl, her prospects are never that good.  It's either housewife, bar girl, or an adventurer I suppose, unless they know enough to go into a trade. And adventurers are an entirely different breed."

"That's true enough," Harry said with a nod.  "I wonder," he mused, pulling up the perception dialogue again and staring at it.  "I wonder if this would be able to tell me more about my enemies and friends, I mean I'd really like to know more about Gorion's stats, but I'm not able to see any of that stuff even if he is family.

Imoen wondered if Harry knew what that he wore a bright grin every time he mentioned the word family.  *I wonder how long it'll be before he trusts me like that.*For now, she simply smiled to herself, patting him on the knee.  "Well, there's only one way to find out isn't there? See how you can raise your perception.  That announcement box mentioned several aspects of perception that you can test, can't you?"

"Yeah," Harry said suddenly enthusiastic.  "That does sound a great idea!"

Over the next few days, Harry concentrated on that aspect of his Gamer ability, although he did step away from flirting further with Cassandra.  He switched to hanging out with Phlydia, and to his very well-hidden pleasure, he was not able to raise their relationship level nearly as quickly as doing so with Cassandra had been.

Phyldia was an older, somewhat scatter-brained elven woman in her mid-twenties, who loved learning things, books and gems in that order.  She was a fit, svelte woman, somewhat like Imoen was with a tan and a small but a very perky chest, and long legs put on display by a dress that had a long slit to either side, letting them be shown whenever she moved.  She had short black hair, and eyes, and a faintly whimsical, smiling sort of face.

And unlike Cassandra she simply wasn't all that interested in jumping into a relationship whereas Cassandra was after a certain point very interested in a physical relationship.  Phlydia also was able to teach him more about gems when he started to ask her questions about the gem she gave him as her reward for the quest to find her glasses.

This led directly into perception again, letting him raise it somewhat.  The perception skill was raised in percentages as Harry used it, which made it a very different type of skill from most he had encountered.  His cooking skill was something similar, but it grew in large clumps, whereas the perception skill was very slow to raise.

While this was going on, Imoen also was raising her stats as much as she could, which unfortunately wasn't very much.  There just weren't very many quests in the tutorial that directly impacted the stats, and those that gave experience stopped giving experience quickly as you redid them.  This left her to practice her thief abilities, which much like Harry's perception skill and cooking skills, only gained in percentages, and again for limited returns after she redid the same things.

This wasn't exactly a smooth process.  Three times she was nearly attacked by Watchers for having tried to sneak into areas that she shouldn't be.  Twice, she tried to pick pocket, only to be attacked by the individual whose pocket she was trying to pick, with everyone else around them piling in on his side of things.  It was only because of Imoen's past habits and some very quick talking on her part that got her out of it. And of course, she also had to fight to get that kind of time free from her lessons with Madame Barca, who looked down on her pick-pocketing skills and her general irreverent attitude, concentrating their lessons now on hiding in shadows and trap detection and creation.  Or rather, those were the only lessons she gave Imoen that she actually listened to.

She did however find that Imoen had a skill slot spent on short bows.  The skill with ranged weapons allowed her to hold it right and pull the string back and fire faster with each skill slot.  And like in combat, there was a little bouncing ball of light, which she had to aim for. If she didn't hit that spot, then she missed entirely, or her arrow bounced off the armor of the target, though hitting it could mean a lot of different things.

But soon enough even that didn't excite Imoen's interest.  In about half the time it took Harry to do the same thing, Imoen got to the point where she wasn't learning anything new in this tutorial phase.  After one rather boring day, she found Harry at their meeting spot before her. This was something that had only rarely happened, considering the time he spent with Phlydia or with Gorion.

The instant he she came into sight, he looked at her.  and stood up, his body almost trembling as he said abruptly.  "All right, I'm done. I know you think you might have more to learn here, but I don't, and this is getting ridiculous.  We have to move on. I have to move on. This whole everyone else forgetting thing is getting to me again, and I am not learning anything new."

"This doesn't have anything to do with the fact that your actually becoming enamored with Phlydia does it?" Imoen teased, while inside she was still a little leery about moving on.  A part of her, a small, all too naive part had hoped that the two of them would be rescued by this point, that the question of moving on would never come up. But it had, and she knew she would have to deal with it.  Imoen was also very concerned about how real the game, or rather this new life of theirs, would become once they left this tutorial phase.

Still, she couldn't argue with the fact that neither of them were learning anything new any longer.  She couldn't raise her basic thieving skills anymore, without raising her actual level any longer, not without taking a lot of lumps.  And the last time she had tried something, Madame Barca had actually let her stew in the little cell that Candlekeep kept for malcontents for the rest of the day.  That had not been fun, especially since Harry had been forbidden to come and see her, and had actually listened to it too. *Seriously, I've seen him act out occasionally, why couldn't he have acted out there?*

"No!" Harry said, flushing a little at Imoen's question.  He did find Phlydia a little, okay, a lot fascinating. Her more erudite and more experienced air, experienced in a very different way than Cassandra, it was hard to describe, really interested him.  But he had been telling the truth when he said that he was once again edging into manipulation territory with the way he could acted around her in just the right way to get the best reaction. But it was also the case that he was no longer be able to add anything to his perception skill or cooking skills.

"Okay," Imoen said with a sigh.  "I suppose we can move on. The question is how."

"That's easy at least," Harry said with a chuckle.  "I go and meet Gorion outside the end, then head into the inn like he said to pick up the supplies from the innkeeper.  I come back out, I meet him, and we go." Despite his flirting with Cassandra, Harry had been careful not to enter the inn, fearing it would start the process of ending the tutorial before they were ready.

"That's fine for you, but what about me?" Imoen growled, poking the larger Harry in the chest.  "Remember what I said about you leaving me behind Potter."

"Sneak out?" Harry shrugged.  "Don't tell me you haven't been looking around for places to get out of Candlekeep."

"Yeah, but remember, I get caught, and told if I go out I'm not coming back." Through this the two of them had learned that it was even more difficult than they had supposed to enter the famous library.  It was such a depository of knowledge that it could demand an outrageous price to enter it: a million gold coins or a single book that could not already be found within. This had heretofore been one of those things that everyone knew and thus didn't need to talk about.

"Why should that matter? I don't think that we're going to be coming back." Harry said with a shrug.

"Point," Imoen said with a nod.  "Okay, tomorrow we'll leave then.  While your meeting with Gorion and going on your way, I'll be looking around for a place to escape.  I'll catch up with you outside somewhere."

**OOOOOOO**

“What do you mean you’ve misplaced my partner?”  Moody growled in anger, his wand pressing into Croaker’s chest.

“Did you know she intended to sneak down here?” Croaker asked, not backing down.

“Of course not, but that sounds like her.  Little lass was worried about the target of our investigation changing.  Now tell me why she was able to sneak down here at all. You lot might not be the most vigilant, but you do have some security here.  No chance someone from another department could have just waltzed down here, even a fully trained Metamorph.”

We let her in,” Croaker admitted.  “We wanted to see what she could do, since there isn’t a single muggleborns in the department.  OH, we know what computers are, but we have very little idea about how they work, let alone the concept of programming.”

Another Unspeakable spoke up from near the computer they had removed from Potter’s house, shaking his head, his face unseen in his hood.  “We had hoped she knew more about it, but we hadn’t anticipated she would just reactivate the thing! Honestly, what are they teaching Aurors these days?  Never trust anything unless you can see where it keeps it’s brain.”

“Hah, own up my friend.  We hadn’t thought that it was possible at all for her to activate the computer like that given the magic dampeners we have all around here.” Croaker said.

He was interrupted then as Moody poked him with his wand again.  “So, how do we get her back huh? And Potter too. There’s only so much longer we can keep a lid on that, hells, I know Dumbledore’s been forced to sit on Potter’s muggleborn friend already,  the one Potter sent his owl to. Bright lass, and feisty too. It’ll take spells to keep her silent before too long.”

“There had been a time when it would have been Albus there,” Croaker said, one eyebrow rising in surprise.

“Yeah, well, let’s just say his idea of constant vigilance and mine have started to differ of late,”   Croaker groused. “Don’t talk as if you’re all that happy with him either, leaving Potter out in the cold like that, with no way to contact him or even for Potter to protect himself.  Dumbledore’s bought into his own hype about second chances too much.”

“Hmm… well we know at least thanks to young Ms. Granger, and you can’t have her Moody, my department saw her first, that Harry had some role in his own disappearance.  I could wish he had mentioned the name of the house elf who helped him repair his computer, but whatever the case, we have been able to figure out what happened there: the house elf and Potter’s magic warred almost with the intent of the soul trap.  So whoever powered up the computer was not absorbed, but rather, sent somewhere.” Croaker began, gesturing over to the computer.

“Where?” Moody asked, finally letting his wand fall.  Not that it was any great consolation, Croaker knew the man had another wand somewhere on him, and a few magical items which were strong enough to work even here.  There was a reason Moody had survived two Dark Lords after all.

“Do you know anything about the pocket dimension theory?” the other Unspeakable asked.  When Moody shook his head the sighed theatrically. “In that case just take it as a given that they have gone very far away indeed.  And we can’t get them back. We can’t reverse the spell. It was more than one spell obviously and it was the muddle of spells rather than a single unified effort that sent him away.  We would have to find a way to somehow discover their location in another manner before we can even try to. It would be like trying to find a single fish in the sea!”

Moody growled, then sent a series of ostensibly nonlethal spells at the man, a light spell followed by a tickling charm aimed at his feet, then a featherlight charm followed by the summoning charm.  As he began to bounce the man off the walls and ignore his shouts of outrage and pain, Moody addressed Croaker. “Then you best get to building a bloody fishing pole, hadn’t you?”

Rolling his eyes Croaker began to talk his old friend down from his semi-murderous anger, as well as trying to explain the difficulty of that task.  “Besides, I think we might have something more important to worry about. That little diary we found on the Malfoy estate. That, that is a dangerous little item Moody, for all It’s unassuming appearance.  Indeed, it might indicate that perhaps Voldemort’s minions are not all we have to fear.”

For a moment, even with the number of missing people having risen by one, Croaker and his associates had far more on their minds.  If that state of affairs would continue however, especially once Harry Potter didn’t show up for school, was anyone’s guess.

**OOOOOOO**

the next day, Harry did not meet with Cassandra.  He did not go off to find Phlydia. He met up with the arms master and defeated him in record time, before going directly to find master Gorion, where he was talking with Candlekeep's blacksmith, a large man with massive arms who was the second hairiest man Harry had ever seen.  The two of them were going over a parchment together, but Gorion looked up as Harry approached. "Ah Harry, have you said your farewells?"

"I have Gorion," Harry said with a smile.  "I'm ready to go."

"Excellent.  In that case, you can go pick up our supplies from the inn." Pulling out one of the sheets of paper that he and the keep's blacksmith were going over, Gorion held it out to Harry.  "I'll be here still quibbling over the price of this armor that I wanted to purchase for you from our resident Smith here."

Harry chuckled at that in bowed his head and waste towards the blacksmith who waved him off.  "Away lad. Your father and I have serious haggling to do. I like you and the lad Gorion, but I won't be letting you convince you me to let this armor go for less than my full price.  Iron is becoming more and more scarce throughout the Sword Coast."

Harry walked away, nodding quietly to himself.  *Yep, Imoen was right, that iron shortage thing is definitely going to show up later on I'm certain.*With a smile on his face as he now began to imagine what adventures awaited him beyond the walls of Candlekeep, Harry made his way towards the inn.

He smiled and waved at Cassandra but didn't stop to talk to her as she exited the rookery to one side with the back basket of eggs, entering the in quickly.  Given all the times that he had flirted, and even kissed her seeing her now was a little off-putting. *Thank God were leaving the tutorial!*

He was wondering idly as he crossed the threshold what God he should actually be thanking that for, because he still hadn't made a decision between the God of justice, or the God of lights, when a voice she'd never heard before shouted for him.  "Hoy, you there! You with the big shoulders and the black hair."

Harry turned, frowning as he saw someone he hadn't seen before.  Considering he hadn't ever been in the inn, that shouldn't have come as a surprise, but he thought he had seen all of the people who worked in the inn outside occasionally.  And I didn't know that the inn actually had any guests. I thought that married couple staying on the keep's fifth floor were the only real outsiders here at this time. Harry tended to stay away from them, considering that they didn't give him any experience, and their bickering was a little much in his opinion.

"Yes," he asked pleasantly.  "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"Nah ya don't but I know you," the other man said with a smirk. "You’d be Gorion's ward, right? The boy he picked up when ya were a babe?"

"I am Harry said frowning now.  "Do you know my father? If you do, why aren't you talking to him, he's out by the gate."

"Because my business ain't with him, it's with you.  Sorry boyo, but someone's paid for your death. And I need to collect that bounty," the man said, stepping forward and pulling out a long dagger thrusting for Harry's chest.

Harry stepped back, twisting to one side as he entered the combat mode, his base level and dexterity allowing him to both see the attack coming, and dodged one side.  While he didn't have any unarmed combat skill as perceived by the game, he was still big, strong, and fast. The other man was faster, coming in and slicing at Harry's arm and chest with his second blow, but Harry was able to dodge enough that the cuts were superficial, and he struck back hard, his fist taking the other man in the throat, and almost dumping him onto his rear.

He stumbled against a table but regained his footing.  However, by the time he did, Harry had his sword and shield out from his item box, causing the man's eyes to widened.  "What the..." But Harry didn't let him recover from his surprise, moving forward with two quick steps and thrusting out hard with his long sword.

The man blocked it, but and then dodged to one side around another table into a bit of shadow, where he activated Hide in Shadows.

Harry lost track of his attacker instantly and backed away quickly heading into the lights cast by the inn's windows while a man at the far back of the inn looked up from where he had been kneading his back with one hand at the clamor of weaponry.  Before Harry could reach the safety of the lighted portions however, his shield arm twisted almost entirely around him to block a blow that would've taken them in his kidneys. *Thank you, automatic blocking technique!* Harry thought to himself as he whipped around in the same direction, bringing his sword around in a flashing arc that caught the surprised thief by surprise, forcing him to raise his blade to block it.

But the short sword was batted to one side, by Harry's hard sideways blow which opened up the man's side.  He squawked in pain and fear now, and tried to back away, throwing a dagger at Harry's face with the speed of a snake.  But again Harry's shield rose, blocking the blow from landing and when the man tried to kick a chair into Harry's way, Harry ducked around it.  A second later he took the other man's desperate sword stab on his shield, thrusting hard with his own sword. It was so automatic that Harry didn't even think of what he was doing, until his sword had punctured straight through the other man's chest.

Then he gasped, staring at the man he had just killed as the light slowly went out of his eyes, blood flowing out of his mouth.  "Dammit, supposed to be... easy... wasn't told..."

Then the man died, and Harry let go of his sword, which clattered to the floor along with the man as he fell forward.  Harry just stared down at him as the blood began to pull on the wooden floor, stepping back so as to not let the blood touches boots, as he just stared in shock, astonished and horrified beyond what even his Gamer's Mind ability could deal with.

The innkeeper had pushed himself to his feet by this time and groaning about his bad back moved around the bar, staring in shock.  "Harry, what, what happened?" He took in the wide unseeing eyes on the young man, and hobbled over, putting a hand on his shoulder, his voice becoming slightly less panicked and far more understanding as he repeated his question.  "Harry what happened?"

"I don't know, he just attacked me!" Harry said.  "He, he asked if I was Gorion's ward, and then said his business was with me, and someone, someone put a bounty on my head!" Harry said, trying to keep cool.  He knew this was all part of the reason why he and Gorion were being forced to leave candle keep, and it was most certainly a sign that it was time to leave. But even with that and his Gamer's Mind trying to keep him from becoming too shocked, and even with the notices that had appeared after combat, he couldn't pull up his eyes away from the dead man.  From the man Harry had just killed. *This is the second person I've killed in my life, dammit, I knew that killing would probably be a part of adventuring, but so soon!?*

"If he came at you with steel lad then you had no choice but to put him down with steel," the innkeeper said with a sigh.  "I should've been leerier of him anyway. He tried to get into the keep with some fool book, and then paid for a week ahead of time, and from then on paid each day as it came.  I should've been much leery her about him, gotten a few of the Watchers to boot him out the main gates. That's on me lad."

Grimacing at his pained back, the innkeeper knelt down, to one side, careful not to let the bloodstain his robe, as he reached for the man's pouch, frowning as he found nothing but coins.  He also found a handwritten note on a piece of parchment and held it out towards Harry grimly.

Harry read it through quickly.  It was a basic message that said that this man had been a member of a group, which had been sent to candle keep, to watch for a man of fair to large height with a lightning scar on his forehead who answered to the name Harry, or Gorion's ward.  That proof of his death would pay for 5000 gold pieces. Harry knew enough about this world now to know that that wasn't exactly a fortune, but it would certainly set up someone for a good long while.

"Should I be insulted or just fearful do you think?" Harry asked staring at the note.

"I'd say both, lad," the innkeeper said with a smile, grateful that Harry was slowly getting out of his funk.  Then he stared down at the body and shook his head. "Still, it's clear that Gorion is taking you out of here not a moment too soon.  I've no idea what's all behind this, certainly can't be anything you've personally done. I've known you since you were but a babe and despite the odd brawl and sticking up for Imoen when she did wrong, you've not done nothing too terrible."

Harry chuckled, and nodded.  "I think that Gorion means to tell me more about something, maybe my origins maybe?" That was about as much as he could remember, that the story was more about Harry's past than anything else, or rather his parentage.  Or this body's parentage anyway, not mine.

"Well, I've got the supplies you and Gorion wanted.  They're over by the end of the bar. Best you take them, meet up with Gorion and get out of here.  I'll tell the Watchers what happened here and get the master at arms to help me bury the body." He held up the thief's jingling coin purse.  "And this will pay for it nicely. Looks as if he had enough money to pay for another few weeks, cheapskate didn't even want to pay ahead of time for days he wouldn't use, I suppose."

Harry nodded at that and left the man to his mutterings about his bad back as he moved to pick up some of the debris of the fight.  Once that was done, Harry moved over to the bar, picked up the large bag there, and had it disappear into his item box, transferring much of the stuff from it into the box before tossing the bag over one shoulder and heading toward the door.

Outside the inn, Harry was debating between going to find Imoen or heading straight for Gorion, when he saw Gorion moving towards them from the entrance way.  That solved that problem and Harry moved in his direction holding up the bag. "I, I have the supplies Gorion."

"And a blooded sword Harry," Gorion said stopping a few feet away staring at his ward and gesturing down to the sword.  "What happened?"

Harry looked at his sword, not having realized he had still been holding it before kneeling down and wiping it off on the grass beneath them.  Once that was done, he then made his sword disappear into his item box, along with his shield. "I, I was attacked Gorion," Harry said slowly, gesturing back towards the inn.

He explained what happened and watched as his adoptive father's face became even more grave and stern.  "I see. In that case, I think we need to leave, now."

Harry nodded, and as they moved towards the entrance way asked, "what is all this about?"

Gorion frowned then answered slowly.  "I don't know the whole story. But someone has been killing orphans all across the Sword Coast.  I'm fearful as to the real cause behind it all, and I am very leery about jumping to conclusions. But there is something off about it.  It isn't just someone trying to murder orphans, it's far too widespread for it to be a single person. And they seem to be going for people, well, individuals like you Harry, who exhibit unusual talents.  Or did you honestly think that every young man who aspires to be a paladin can become as good and as strong as you are? You might only be level five Paladin, but your physical abilities set you apart."

Harry scowled irritably.  There had been a time before this game began that Harry had thought he would be happy with just being a normal person, just disappearing into the background.  That time was well in the past though, and he nodded. "Understood. Then what are we doing? Are we just going to be running away from whoever is after me, or will we try to hunt him down in turn?" His tone indicated which one he would prefer, although he also didn't look like he relished the thought.

"We'll hunt them down Harry, eventually," Gorion said, as they finally stepped out of candle keep through the wide tall outer walls and between the massive gates.  "As I said, this conspiracy of murder is far too widespread for it to be any one person. There might be one overarching legal leader but finding him will be very difficult."

The two of them turned as they were hailed by one of the guards.  This was an armed and armored Watcher, holding a large Pike in one hand, with the butt resting on the ground.  He looked at them, nodding formally to Gorion. Master Gorion, we will be a sad to see you go, as well as you Harry.  But you must know the rules. Once you leave, you cannot come back home here to candle keep without paying the price: One book that cannot be found within, or 1 million gold."

"When I was younger it was 100,000 gold," Gorion said crossly, shaking his head before he smiled at the man.  "But that's inflation for you I suppose. He held out his hand to the guard, who took it with his offhand, gripping the forearm firmly.  "I know the rules my friend, and frankly I think more than a few of the Watchers within will be grateful to see the backs of myself and my young ward here.  He's never made any bones about not wanting to join the Order after all."

"Much like Imoen," Harry said, cutting in more so to say something and take his mind off what had just happened then that he knew that for a fact.  Although given Imoen's personality, that was kind of a no-brainer.

The guard's face instantly became a little pained.  "Yes, Imoen. And you're not going to be around any longer to be the main thought of her pranks.  All of a sudden this doesn't sound all that good for those of us who are staying behind."

"I'm sure she won't burn the entire keep down," Harry said, then paused.  "At least I hope not." *Although if she does set a fire to try and draw attention away from her escape, that could possibly happen? Best not to mention that.*

Gorion lightly swatted Harry on the shoulder.  "Don't scare the poor man. Now come on, I want to get to the Friendly Arm Inn in two days."

"At your age?" the gatekeeper said with a guffaw.  "Good luck with that. Still, farewell friend Gorion, and you too young Harry." Then his face firmed, and he moved behind them resolutely putting himself in the way of their turning around as within, someone started to slam the main doors shut, barring their way backwards.  The message was clear. Candle Keep was no longer their home and was now closed to them.

Harry found himself sort of sad about that.  He didn't know how long he'd stayed there, probably about half a year or so, maybe longer, learning as much as he could and getting used to this new world and his gamer powers, as well as how they interacted with everyone else's abilities here.  But, in a large way, this place wasn't like Hogwarts. Hogwarts had become a home away from home for a time, until the issue with Quirrell occurred, which sort of tainted the castle in his eyes. With candle keep he knew he could not make a home of the keep thanks to the tutorial and knew now that it was time to move on.

The two of them traveled along the path leading to candle keep from the main road along the Sword Coast for the rest of that day, but the sky began to turn black with storm clouds long before they would have stopped for the evening.  Grimacing Gorion said that they would have to make camp soon and led the way off the path into the woods to search for a likely spot. They found one on top of a slight hill in the woods where two trees met at an angle, creating a decent enough little bower to hide their smoke from their campfires.

Even as they had walked Gorion had been instructing Harry on woodcraft and other skills needed on the trail, which Harry lapped up because the instant he did, they started to become actual skills, much like Harry's perception skill, adding to his repertoire.  If that had been the case for Gorion he made no sign of it, simply instructing Harry as the day wound on with a small smile on his face.

Now they put some of those skills to use, creating a fire pit, lining it with stone, and's creating a small fire within before covering it with leaves, to further block out the smoke.  Yet even with a small light from their fire, the night was closing in very dramatically, and Harry shivered staring out into it. Something about it was forbidding almost. It reminded him almost of the Forbidden Forest that time with Hagrid, the unicorns and how they had been attacked by Voldemort's shade.  *If someone riding a horse walks up to us and goes the stars are bright tonight, I'm going to lose it.*

Gorion moved to stand beside him, staring out into the darkness himself.  "Well, I suppose we shouldn't have thought that everything would be sunny and nice as we left home, now should we?"

Harry shrugged.  "True enough, but is this kind of weather normal?"

"On the sword coast?" the older man barked a laugh.  "I see that Watcher Trodan's teachings have gone in one ear and out the other.  Oh yes, the storms that give this coast it's fell reputation among sailors don't just hit the coast itself lad.  Indeed, you'd have to travel for weeks inland to get away from them. And this is the season for traveling too."

"Great," Harry drawled.  "So I should get used to the whole getting wet thing on a daily basis then?"

"You won't shrink in it like salt Harry, have no fear.  The only real danger that comes with the rain normally are the selkies that can be found on the shores, and those shores are far from here," the man said with a laugh.  "Now come, I'm hungry. And since you're the younger of us, it's your turn to cook first."

"How does that make any sense, shouldn't I, as the younger, watch you cook over the fire first to learn how it goes?"

"Perhaps if I had spent any time in candle keep in the kitchens, unlike you.  Now go on. Enough prevaricating." Gorion ordered. "I'm hungry."

As soon as Harry began his cooking skill began to activate, and it helped him perform decently enough over the open fire, good enough to create a good solid stew from their packs.  The two of them ate in companionable silence with Harry asking about the roads and the map of the area as Gorion knew it, as well as any specific plans Gorion was willing to make at this point.

Gorion however shook his head.  "Other than heading to the Friendly Arm Inn in order to meet up with a few friends of mine, I'm not willing to make any set plans."

"Friends?"

Gorion hesitated, then sighed.  "You have never asked what I did as an adventurer and I thank you for respecting my privacy, which I had reasons for, good reasons.  In fact, would it shock you to know that I was part of the Harpers?"

Harry leaned back staring at his father thoughtfully.  The Harpers he had learned through his reading were a group dedicated to the balance, to what were known as the true neutral gods.  They acted out against the dark gods most often, but they also acted against the light gods occasionally, when those gods got too big for their britches essentially.  They were a secret society known of the world over ironically enough, and any harpers and bards of the road could be one of them.

Generally speaking they were a force for good, despite their whole harping on about true neutrality, so Harry had no problem seeing his father taking that role.  "I would say it wouldn't surprise me much," he said with a shrug. "You don't seem the spying type, but I have to imagine that the Harpers have a militant arm or something similar, don't they?"

"Actually, I was both spy and active participant as we would put it," Gorion replied with a shrug.  "And my friends are much the same, although they are still active occasionally for the Harpers. I sent messages to them requesting their aid and I hope to meet them at the Friendly Arm Inn.  Or if not there, then further south. I know they will be sent in to investigate this iron shortage issue. There is no possible way it can be as simple as it appears at first blush."

Harry was about to ask him what he meant by that, when there was a thunderous crash of thunder from outside.  Soon after this was answered by a piercing ghoulish howl.

Instantly Harry was on his feet, his sword in one hand, his shield on the other.  Gorion however moved around him, pushing him back with one hand. "Armor lad, get your armor on." Gorion had never taken his off but hadn't stopped Harry from doing so.  "And let this be a lesson Harry," Gorion said as Harry fumbled with his armor, which he had not put back into his item box, rather setting it to one side to go over for rust spots.  Never take your armor off when you're in the field no matter how rusty it gets, not even when you're behind the walls of an inn."

"What do you think is out there?" Harry asked, as he pulled on his armor and moved to stand beside Gorion staring out from underneath the branches of their camp into the darkness of the forest.

"Hopefully just wolves, but that howl sounded a little too human," Gorion said slowly.  He narrowed his eyes, and began to enchant a spell, then lashed out into the darkness ahead of them with a flash charm, brighter and more powerful than any Harry had seen back in his old world.  That charm lit up the forest, and elicited howls of pain and agony from the group that had slowly begun to encircle them.

As it lit up the night for a moment the forest was as visible as if by day, and Harry took a moment to stare at their enemies.  Some of them were wolves, about ten or so, spread out all around, their eyes showing the blank nature of a charmed beast, which Harry had read about his books.  There were two shapes well behind the wolves to Harry's right, wearing robes and staffs, which Harry knew meant that those two were mages. But mixed in with the wolves were four other figures, hunchbacked, with long arms trailing on the ground like a gorilla almost, but without any fur, a loincloth being the only thing of clothing they wore, and a mouth full of fangs.

And behind even the mages was another form, a large monstrous form taller than even Harry.  It was even broader in the shoulders and wore matte black armor that covered everything from head to toe, making it impossible for Harry to see anything of the man within.

He was chanting something even as Gorion's blast of light went off and gestured forward with one hand, sending some kind of power forward, though it didn't come with a shouted spell, so Harry didn't know what it was.  Gorion intercepted it with a harsh command, a magic bolt lashing out from his finger to catch the incoming spell and dissipated. But that attention cost the two of them, because it took Gorion's attention away from the two spell casters.  They launched fireballs at Harry and his foster father, which exploded directly in front of them.

Harry screamed in pain, as he was hurled backwards off of his feet from the explosion, and rolled down the hillside, to fetch up against a tree.  Instantly a message box appeared in front of him. "Warning, you have taken damage. Unknown enemy caster has used fireball to impact you for -25 health.  Warning, you have cracked a rib, -20 to health. -2 two dexterity agility and strength so long as this wound continues."

Gasping in pain, Harry pushed himself to his feet groggily, and was not surprised that he had lost his longsword.  Pulling out another longsword from his item box was easy enough, as was using his single healing potion. It had been among the supplies the innkeeper had given them and had been the first one Harry had seen, though he had seen pictures of them in books before this.  Downing it, he was grateful to see that it quickly went to work need knitting his rib back together, although it didn't do much for his overall health points. Adding only 15 back, leaving him still at half health.

I'll just have to be extra careful then, he thought grimly, as he started back up the hill.  Two of the things Harry now recognized as ghouls however had followed him quickly downwards, causing Harry to stop.  He concentrated, and thrust forward with one hand, then clutched it into a fist shouting “Turn undead."

One of the ghouls was caught by the spell and collapsed into dust.  The other however kept coming, only pausing for a second. Harry then charged forward, his sword lashing out.  Even as he did so, he worried about what was happening up top where flames fireballs and now lightning could be seen as Gorion dueled the others.  *Please be alright Gorion!*

**OOOOOOO**

it had taken Imoen about three hours to figure out a way to escape Madame Barka's presence.  The woman seemed to know that she had wanted to follow Harry and was determined to make sure that she stayed behind.  However, eventually Imoen gave her the slip, and then attempted to get outside, and did so by the most expedient matter: she simply ran pell-mell through the front gate.

The gate guard paused as he saw the pink-haired girl racing by him, then shouted after her "You know you won't be able to get back in, right Imoen?"

"Sod that," Imoen shouted over her shoulder.  "I'm going with Harry!"

The gatekeeper stared after her, then chuckled shaking his head.  And if anyone even Watcher Barka is surprised by this, I think they'll have to have their heads examined." With a sigh he nodded at the viewer slot sliding to one side of the large gate.  As Imoen raced on she heard the resounding clang of the door closing behind her ritually. When she was out of sight it would open again, but the gates of candle keep, both the castle and the library keep itself, were now closed to her.

Imoen raced on halting when her stamina began to appear in her view.  Resting for a bit, then moving on. Unlike the other two however she didn't have any supplies, having been unable to gather them as Gorion had before heading out.  She had a lot of food on her, stuck in her item box, which she had discovered could keep food at the precise heat that it was when it entered the box. But she didn't have any bedrolls or anything of that nature.  *Still, it won't be the first time I've roughed it out of doors.*

Racing along, Imoen was almost within sight of Harry's back when the sky began to cloud over, and the two of them skirted into the woods.  There she lost them for a bit. Whatever else could be said about Imoen, she had been a city girl, and Imoen had never been beyond candle keep's outer walls.  Because of this she rapidly became lost out here in the woods.

However, when the fight began, the fireballs and noise from it acted like a beacon, and she raced through the woods, up the small hill only to stop and stare as Harry, was blown off the side of the hill and was sent tumbling down.  Growling angrily, she pulled out her shorts bow, and notched an arrow to it, then activated Hides in Shadows. In the dark of night and with the rain coming down around her, the technique was easy to activate, with little chance of failure.

So covered, Imoen moved around, heading up the hill in a roundabout way, towards where Gorion and Harry were, her eyes searching for enemies, as they had been taught in Auror's school: when coming to the aid of pinned down fellows you didn't join them, you took the enemy out first, and if you could sneak up on them all the better.  Luckily, or unluckily depending on your point of view, Imoen found the enemy quickly in the form of a snarling group of wolves. Three of them, and then something else beyond, something that stank, the stench of it making her eyes nearly weep. *Right, stinky gets it first.*With that in mind, she pulled back her arrow, and let fly.

Through the days spent in the tutorial area Imoen and Harry had been able to discover that she had a skill slot spent on the short bow.  They had even tested it, and found that it, like close quarter combat, had a small moving target. For ranged attacks it took the form of a large, circular target.  According to the message box they had initially seen when she tried it, at higher levels the target marker would change, so that the archer could wound, maim, or try for a critical hit.  Of course, any damage dealt also was affected by the armor, both natural and worn, of the target. Luckily, Imoen had always been a very damn good shot with spells, and, thanks to the skill slot, hadn't needed to go through a long learning period on how to use a bow.

The arrow thwapped into the stinky fellow's head, but didn't do much damage, simply embedding itself there.  And worst, Imoen had forgotten that attacking like that pushed her out of Hides in Shadows and this gained the creature's attention.  The creature she had attacked and the three nearest wolves turned to her and raced forward. But the speed of the creature, which Imoen now knew was some kind of undead, was astonishing, and it crossed the distance between them far faster than Imoen had thought it could.

"Bugger me! Stupefy!" she shouted, thrusting one hand forward.  The spell. a wide circle of reddish energy flashing through the night too fast to ruin her night vision thankfully, spread out like a cone away from her and hit her targets.  But to her surprise the creature seemed to simply shake it off and keep coming. The two wolves to either side skidded to a halt, collapsing where they had stood, as the wide reddish beam hit them.  This left one wolf racing toward her with the undead creature.

She quickly dropped her short bow, and whipped out her short sword, getting it up into the thing's face and using it to block the creature's attempts to bite at her, but there her special ability 'Fight like a Jackrabbit' activated, and allowed her to dodge its claws.  a quick cutting spell took the thing's leg off at the hip,, it's undead constitution no match for magic, although the minus ten points to Imoen's health was worrying. It fell and Imoen backed away only to face the leaping wolf. She barely got her sword up in time and the wolf struck, taking her to the ground.  Her sword was thankfully between them, and the wolf's own weight caused the sword to cut into it. the wolf yelped and leaped away, and Imoen rolled clear. Before the wolf could recover, Imoen had sent another cutting spell at it, cutting the wolf's head clear off.

"Bloody hell, thank goodness it wasn’t a werewolf." She grumbled, standing up straight and then moving over to the two stupefied wolves, finishing them off with short thrusts down with her short sword into the thing's back, right at the base of the neck severing their spine.  Then, she turned to the undead creature, which was now trying to crawl towards her, using its arms as legs with far too much ease for her liking. "Damn me..." Imoen backed away rapidly, then lashed out with a fire spell, the magical equivalent of a flame thrower, thought an instant later, as the creature screamed and died, the hit to her hit points caused her to go lightheaded.

"Warning, continued use of Blood Mage spells will take its toll on you.  -50 to health." A message box intoned warningly, the box flashing red and black.

That, with the spells she'd already used, left Imoen at well below half health, and even though her body was still hale and uninjured, Imoen could feel it, a nasty throb behind her eyes a certain wooziness and weakness of the body.  That last aspect cleared quickly, but not the throbbing, which increased in turn. Still, thanks to her Auror training and generally scrappy attitude, Imoen/Imoen was used to pain, and bore through her first batch of enemies dealt with, Imoen turned away and raced on up the hill towards where the conflagration was happening.

**OOOOOOO**

Harry grimaced as he blocked the blow from the ghoul, then smashed his shield into its face when it tried to bite him, but his eyes were for the small red dot that he was following, and in a second, his longsword flashed out, embedding itself in the creature's forehead, slicing into its brain box, and sending it collapsing to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Gasping in relief, Harry turned and made certain the four wolves that had followed the ghoul down and attacked him during his battle with the ghoul were all dead.  Thankfully they were, but not before one of them had taken a bite out of one of Harry's legs when he had slipped lightly in the mud. Ignoring that wound for now though, Harry made his way slowly up the hill, still dealing with a lot of pain from being thrown down the hill by the initial fireball on top of the bite.  as he moved up the hill several more wolves charged towards him, and Harry debated with himself whether or not to conserve his magic and deal with them slowly, or get back to Gorion and help him against the real threat. Really, there's no choice there.

He moved to the side, so that both wolves were coming at him from the front rather than from too wide a difference in angle and then cast the Stupefy spell once more, gasping as the ten hit points were drained from him.  In his wounded state, that dropped him down to below half health, and he grimaced, unwilling to give into the pain. Still the spell worked, knocking both wolves out. He finished them both, then stood for a moment, gasping in air, shaking his head.  *Dammit! Those spells really do take it out of me.*

Shaking his head though, Harry moved upwards as fast as he could in his debilitated state, then stopped as a loud ringing noise appeared, and a large than average message box appeared in front of him lined in gold.  "A possible party member has appeared in your area of control; do you wish to add Imoen to your party?"

Wondering about how that had occurred and why it had occurred now, Harry could only gape in astonishment for a brief second before shouting out "yes!" and smacking his hand lightly on the green button, forgetting in his haste that he could've just used his eye movements to do just that or that he wouldn't actually feel anything under his hand, nearly overbalancing himself in his haste and from the wound in his leg.

An instant later he knew precisely where Imoen was, the girl appearing on his small map as a bright green dot and moved around the hill towards her.  As he did so, he quickly began to read off a series of little notices.

"Now that Imoen is in your party, you can access her item box.  You can access her skills and stats. You can access her character sheet.  Warning, you cannot make changes to Imoen's character sheet. You can only view it.  When Imoen levels up, you will be able to distribute her skill and stat points as you see fit.  Always keep in mind the character of the individual however."

Putting that to one side for more important matters, Harry went on to the next declaration.  This one was even more important. "As a member of your party, you have limited control over the actions of Imoen the thief, you can also create team techniques, dual attacks.  Passive abilities one party member has will be shared throughout the party for a limited time, as will active skills or auras. Your active aura, 'Turn Undead' has been activated on Imoen.  Imoen's passive ability, 'Fight like a Jackrabbit' has been activated on you the player. You will be more difficult to hit from now on until the end of combat or until Imoen's stamina is decreased."

"Why couldn't we have practiced with this shit before?!" Imoen shouted through the tumult of the rain as she came upon Harry, gratefully leaping up and over a decomposing ghoul, who had been about to take a bite out of her before she had even known it was there.  Harry's Turn Undead ability suddenly radiating out from her had saved her life, and she breathed a sigh of relief even as she took in Harry's bedraggled, wounded appearance. *Not, mind you, that I'm any better.  Shit, this combat is far too fucking real for my liking, best get the idea that this is a game whatever the stats and shit say out of my head.*

this oddly enough won her a "Master of the Obvious: for spotting something so obvious it really, **really** should have occurred to you before this, you have earned one intelligence point.  Perhaps one day you can aspire to be smart enough to operate complex equipment, like doorknobs, on your own.  +1 to intelligence." which she grumbled at and waved off easily.

Harry didn't even notice the message box appearing in front of her, already turning away and gesturing to the top of the hill.  "I don't know, and I don't care. Come on! Gorion's still up there, and..."

There was a flashing blast of thunder, and a scream, which came from a throat neither of them knew, and a body was sent tumbling through the air and down towards them forcing them to dodge backwards.  It was one of the attackers from before, one of the two mages. "Um, are you sure he needs our help?" Imoen asked somewhat shakily. Even though she had been a trainee Auror this was the first real, to the death type fight she'd ever been in, and she was kind of astonished Harry was handling it as well as he was.  I wish I had the Gamer mind thing that he does, she groused, even as she turned and raced up after him.

"There has to be one more mage and this armored giant up there," Harry said, thinking quickly.  "Let's move around to the side. See if we can spot them, then when I charge in, you take them from behind."

Imoen nodded and reactivated her Hide in Shadows skill.  As she did, another image popped up in front of Harry. "Because of her trust in you, Imoen has obeyed your commands, and when she acts in concert with the rest of the party, will receive a +4 to damage and +6 defense.  Because of your friendship your relationship with Imoen, your relationship with Imoen has raised to 'family'. The odds of activating dual attacks, combo and other team-based attacks has increased."

Staring in shock at that, Harry held back a whoop with difficulty.  That family line meant a lot to him on an emotional level, but the rest of it was just fantastic.  Imoen didn't honestly have a lot of strength, something that Imoen had complained about a lot of times as she was getting used to her new persona.  But this, this could be a game changer for her. Just like her agility boost to him could be, especially in his wounded state.

Setting such thoughts aside for now, Harry crested the hill and came upon a site of destruction.  There were four ghoul bodies burning to a crisp ear and there, the ghouls within the fire twitching this way and that.  No wolf corpses could be seen, but there was the body of a giant bear which hadn't been there before. Six gnolls, large creatures with the body of men and hyenas mixed had also showed up from somewhere but were also dead.  Indeed, their bodies were liberally scattered around the area save for two who had obviously been killed by Gorion's sword, a longsword like Harry's but with a better blade to it, which now lay shattered on the ground of the battlefield, almost sinking into the mud.  *Jesus! Gorion is one tough old son of a bitch.*

But it was obvious that Gorion was flagging now.  He was still under the attack of two more gnolls and the armored giant, who was simply cackling at him, smacking his spells aside as he marched towards his prey.  Despite the fact that Gorion too was armored, still held a dagger and had a magical shield all around him Harry knew how that contest would have to end. There was something about that man, something almost unstoppable.  Added to that was the fact that Harry couldn't perceive his level, even with his perception ability, which had allowed him to perceive the levels of a few of the Watchers within candle keep who were not friendly towards him.  The others he could see the levels of, to level 12 gnolls, and a level 10 mage.

keeping to the shadows just beyond the sizzling fires here and there from the magical combat, Harry then broke out into the light, making his way towards the mage in plain sight as he whispered, "Take the mage."

The mage turned to Harry and he lashed out with magic bullets, which Harry used his shield to lock, grimacing.  the small magic bolts were barely the size of a few fingers, the number of them matching the level of the mage. They hit like tine sledgehammers, nearly tossing Harry to his rear, and his health bar dropped further when one bold got through to sizzle into his shoulder.

Imoen grimaced as she moved around the fight, as one of the gnoll warriors too turned towards Harry.  But Harry had told her to take the mage and judging by the fact that he was now chanting another spell while staring at Harry she had no issue with that order.  *I just hope that Harry can handle that hyena guy, darn it, I know I should have spent more time on the books.*

To her surprise Harry didn't remain on the defense.  Instead he charged forward, engaging the gnoll in a contest of whirling blades, dodging this way and that to keep the gnoll between himself and the mage.  This both kept the gnoll from using its large billhook to good effect and kept both of their attention on him, as Imoen circled around them.

An instant later Imoen was in position right behind the mage.  She came out of her hide in shadows technique and stabbed him just as he was about to launch another spell, taking him straight in the back and kidneys.

"Imoen has used backstab.  Imoen has benefited from being part of your party and in the trust inherent in your relationship level, family.  Instant kill!" practically shouted the message box that appeared in front of both Imoen and Harry.

The message was instantly proven correct as the mage gasped, and died, blood streaming from his side and mouth as Imoen pulled the sword back.  She now leaped forward, nearly losing her footing on the muddy, wet ground as the gnoll warrior Harry had been facing turned to move to one side so it could take them both in but this let Harry push forward, nearly taking the creature in the chest with his blade.  By the time the beast set its feet against Harry's renewed offensive, Imoen was gone.

He tried frantically to search around for her, but couldn't do that and keep Harry at arm’s length.  He paid for this lack of attention a second later as Harry's sword once more found the red dot, and the creature's arm flew off, cut through at the wrist.  The hyena-like gnoll had just a moment to open its maw to scream before Imoen’s short sword found him in the back of the neck. Her sword though shattered, and she gawked down at it.  "What the..."

"Weapons have a durability rating remember, no time to worry about it now," Harry shouted, pulling out a short sword from his own item box and tossing it to her.  She caught it deftly, and they twisted around, racing towards where Gorion was facing the giant as best their wounds would allow.

Just as they did though, Gorion's final protective shield went down, and instant later, the armored giant sword found him, stabbing through Gorion's chest.  The massive blade lifted Gorion off of his feet. "You were good Gorion, very, very good. But your instincts for combat seem to have degraded. You should never have let me close to you, whatever you thought of your shield.  Don't worry though, your ward will soon be joining you."

Harry and Imoen were close enough to hear those words, and close enough to shout in shock it what they were seeing, but they weren't close enough to hear what Gorion whispered in return, perhaps because it wasn't even in response to what the man had shouted, or rather monologued.  Instead, it might have been a spell, because in the next instant, Gorion had spat out in the man's face, and instead of the spit simply hitting, it sizzled like acid, burning into the man's armored face. The acid somehow ate into the armor almost instantly and the man screamed in agony, wiping at his full helmet which only served to spread it, and Gorion stumbled back, the sword still embedded in him, one hand holding it there, as he spat again and again at the man, hitting his face several more times with the acid spell.

Shrieking in pain and fury, the man bellowed out "Damn you old man, you have only delayed the inevitable!" With that, he released his massive sword and fell back.  Even as Harry and Imoen raced forward to join the fight he pulled out some kind of scroll from his pouch that he had been carrying to one side of his waist and crushed it within his grip.  The next instant, he was gone, leaving behind his sword still embedded in Gorion's stomach and chest.

Harry shouted in fury and grief and raced forward, grabbing at Gorion even as he cursed the fact that he had already used his one healing potion as he tried to save his mentor's life.

"D, don't bother Harry," Gorion said.  "I, I know a mortal wound when I, gah, feel it.  And neither of you, \*hack\* are healers. Sorry. Sorry, Harry.  Would have been with you, would have \*cough\* helped you. But this road, \*hack\*, seems you'll have to walk it without me.  Loved you like a son, Harry. Rem, \*hack\* remember that. And remember, whatever you are family, whatever your, your patronage, you… you are… it is the… choices…you… make… that define…you." And with that, Gorion, former Harper, former adventurer, adopted father of Harry, died in his son's arms.

To one side, Imoen could only grab at Harry's shoulder from behind as Harry began to weep quietly, shaking his head from side to side.  "I, I know he really shouldn't have gotten as close as he did to me. I know it, it shouldn't matter as much," he said not looking back at her as he sobbed through his tears.  "But he really was a father figure to me."

"I know luv," Imoen said, sliding to her knees in the mud and wet earth underneath them putting her wet arms around Harry's equally wet armored chest hugging him to her and laying her head on his back.  "I know."

How long they sat like that, with Harry simply staring at Gorion's body in his arms weeping, neither of them knew.  But eventually Imoen slowly extricated herself from Harry standing up again and laying her hands on his shoulders. "Come on Harry.  We'll bury him together. He wouldn't want you to just. just keep holding him like that. We need to move on."

Harry nodded, turning his eyes upwards and around to see that now that the rain had let up, some of the fires from the fight were growing burning merrily.  "We'll need to make certain those fires don't get out of hand; we don't want a forest fire to start even if there aren't any people around it could spread back to candle keep.  Plus the lights of the fires will let us bury Gorion. And after that," Harry said, picking up his sword as he gently laid Gorion's body to rest on the ground, returning it to his item box.  After that, we're going to go to this Friendly Arm Inn, meet these friends of his Gorion told me about. And then I am going to make ass hole who did this to him and hunt him down like a dog."

**End Chapter**

I realize I didn’t go into the game mechanics as much in this chapter, but I am still feeling my way in this story, which is fun, but also will mean the way I describe the world or write out some types of scenes will change.  I also wanted to show Harry and Tonks interacting without getting bogged down too much in that or the whole showing the stats thing. Going forward, I will show how the Gamer differs from the Adventurer type norm, and of course, introduce our favorite snarky elf and her emascul, er I mean her happily henpecked, husband LOL.  Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this.

**This has been beta-read by Udodelig Urningin. It’s his first time folks, and you know my issues with spotting small mistakes LOL.**

**Bhaalson Chapter 3: Gaming with Friends**

**Putting out the fires around them took the two of them some time, and by the time they were finished, the sky was noticeably lighter than it had been, dawn breaking over the forest. After they were done with that, though, Harry looked between Imoen and Gorion’s body before deciding that the buildup of messages in his upper-right line of sight was getting annoying. Anything to put off dealing with Gorion’s death again for a time was a good thing in his mind.**

**“We need to talk about all the pop-ups that we saw during the fight that we didn’t have time to reply to.” He said aloud. Harry had played around with his character screen back during the tutorial phase and figured out how to only let the most important message screens through to him in combat, while putting the others in a queue to look at later, but this was the first time that system had been put through its paces in real combat. He thought it had worked very well, with only the messages that had direct impact on the battle showing up at the time, such as in Imoen’s ability to Backstab, her getting into range to join his party and the fact that having the two of them in a party had given her and Harry some added bonuses or, on the other side of the ledger, notices about the injuries they had taken. But his queue was seriously full up now, and it was going to bother him a lot until he cleared it off.**

“Let’s look at the combat data first,” Imoen said. Harry looked at her, and she shrugged. “Harry, no matter how much training you might’ve had, this is only your first fight. I think the both of us needs to get a better handle on how this gaming stuff works in combat.”

“Second actually. Some idiot tried to assassinate me back in Candlekeep, in the inn outside the keep,” Harry said, but he didn’t argue with Imoen’s point, pulling up all of the information that had popped up during the combat. Important message boxes were outlined in gold, while combat boxes came in red, but they also included little triangles of red colored in each corner.

And they had organized themselves thanks to his earlier fiddling, which Harry reflected was very helpful. *Should really have gotten more than one wisdom point for that, really.* The first few red boxes that popped up was information about ghouls.

“Information on the monster, Ghoul, has been added to your lexicon. The lexicon will house all the information on every monster or creature that your party runs into, filling in the information beyond the name of the beast that the lexicon will already have within. This information will include things like weaknesses, strengths, and disposition. To use the lexicon, say the name, and then the name of the beast in question.”

“Lexicon,” Harry muttered, then blinked as the image of a ghost-like book filled his vision turning around to look at Imoen when he heard her gasp. “Wait can you see it too?”

“Yep. But…” Imoen reached forward, waving her hand in the air looking for all the world like she was trying to swat a fly. “But I can’t interact with it, darn it.”

“Maybe you will if you are the one to call for it. For now though…” With that, Harry reach forward, and tapped the near-see through book. “Ghoul.”

At his touch the book expanded by about four times so that both Harry and Imoen could see the writing within. At the same time, an image of one of the undead creatures Harry had killed in hand to hand combat appeared to one side. Harry couldn’t interact with the image, but the information to one side was pretty useful even without that. The information read:

Ghouls are undead creatures that, according to folklore, are said to be created after the death of a man or woman who engaged in cannibalism, but really just about any unburied body can turn into one given time and enough ambient magic in the area around the corpse. Ghouls can paralyze those enemies they attack with their claws or fangs, any touch on open skin is enough to let their touch begin its work. They are the weaker, more common versions of Ghasts, and can be easily distinguished by their green skin as opposed to the brown skin of the latter.

**Strengths**: they are undead, so if you don’t kill the brain or cut off limbs they won’t notice anything else you do to them. Endurance also stays constant, as does reaction time, and speed. Strength varies from individual to individual but is generally higher than most normal non-adventuring humans. Immunity to Dark-aligned magic, high level of endurance for water, air, mind and earth based magics.

**Attitude towards adventurers:** unremitting desire, but not the good kind. Like many undead, they want to kill you and will attack on sight regardless of anything else. But Ghouls, like Ghasts, also want to eat your brains, but they aren’t picky, they will settle for the rest of you too.

**Weaknesses:** Fire and Holy magic. Like all undead, they burn very nicely, and the touch of holy magic, even the flare of healing magic on an opponent, will hurt.

“See Harry, this is what I’m talking about!” Imoen said throwing her arms up in irritation. Then she put them behind her head as she stared at the message with Harry, reading through the information about ghouls again. “This stuff would’ve been hugely helpful to know. Those things had been darn tough to kill in hand to hand after all. And what the heck is the difference between Ghoul and Ghast?”

That question was answered in second later, as Harry intoned that name. Instead of just getting the name though, he saw another message box disappearing from his que, and, a second later, the information on this monster appearing in front of him.

Ghasts are the more dangerous versions of ghouls for many reasons. Made from the bodies of stronger humans or other species, they can exhibit both self-control and a certain low cunning that Ghouls cannot. Further, they are stronger, faster, and able to command Ghouls at times. Their claws and fangs are capable of not only paralyzing opponents like their lesser kin but also of inflicting disease, which has a cumulative effect on anyone thus touched. When more than one is encountered, they can be quite dangerous to low-level parties, and are best fought with ranged weapons and spells.

**Strengths**: They are obviously undead, so if you don’t kill the brain or lop of limbs, they won’t notice. Endurance also stays constant, as does reaction time, and speed and strength, all of which is higher than most level three Adventurers. Paralyzing effects and disease come from their touch. Immunity to Dark-aligned magic, high level of endurance for water, air, mind and earth based magics.

**Attitude towards adventurers**: unremitting desire, but not the good kind. Like many undead, they want to kill you and will attack on sight regardless of anything else. Ghasts, like their lesser cousins the Ghouls, also want to eat your brains, but they aren’t picky, they will settle for the rest of you too.

**Weaknesses**: Fire and Holy magic. Like all undead, they burn very nicely, and the touch of holy magic, even the flare of healing magic on an opponent, will hurt.

Harry blanched, as he read about the disease that this more evolved version of ghouls contained in their claws. “Bloody hell… Um, I’d guess that was the ghoul that my Turn Undead aura turned to dust. The Luck stat, it’s not just for show.” He quipped but it fell flat.

“We need to figure out a way to read this information in combat, because that could’ve killed us right there Harry if you were unlucky enough to try to fight that thing in hand-to-hand. And me too, geez.” Imoen shook her head, her bubblegum pink hair rustling.

“From what Gorion once told me, death isn’t actually so eternal here most of the time. That is, if my body is still intact, you could use a resurrection spell or scroll on me to bring me back.” Harry replied, trying to be helpful.

From the look in Imoen’s face, that attempt failed just like his earlier quip, and Harry tugged at the neckline of his undershirt for a moment looking away from her glower and twitching fingers even as he felt a little warm inside. He was still getting used to the fact that Imoen really did care for him, but moments like this really brought it home to him, and he smiled as he realized that even without Gorion, he still had a friend, a family member, on this journey of his despite how they had both gotten here.

The next few messages were about experience points awarded for each of the enemies they had killed. The ghouls had given them 175 experience points, the one ghast a whopping 650. The wolves only gave 65, but surprisingly that was equal to the Gnoll Veterans that they had killed on their charge to help Gorion. The wolves and Gnoll Veterans also had their own lexicon pages, but Harry didn’t bother opening them now. The mage they had killed didn’t but gave the two friends a nice 800 experience.

“I have to say, it is kind of morbid to get experience points from killing things.” Imoen murmured shaking her head as they continued to read the messages. “But on the other hand… meh, they started it.”

Going through the XP message boxes brought them to the first character specific message they had seen. It was lined with pink and gold, the pink in it matching Imoen’s hair color exactly. And it was just as important as it looked.

“Congratulations you have leveled up! Imoen is now a level Five Thief. Steal, trap, pickpocket, and stab your way to if not fame then fortune. After all, everyone wants to die happy and rich, don’t they?

Imoen’s chance of successfully using Backstab, Hide in Shadows, Detect Traps, and Unlock locked items or traps has risen by 2.5%. Specific experience can further aid these skills. You have been assigned stats points, of which you will receive four per level. You have been assigned a skill point of which you will receive one per level. As Imoen is now companion to the Gamer, the Gamer can help you distribute these points rather than have them be assigned based upon the action that leveled you up. Use them wisely and remember to always not over specialize too much. No one wants to play with a glass cannon after all.”

Ignoring Harry’s querulous query of ‘what’s a glass cannon’ Imoen whooped, throwing a fist in the air. “Awesome! I was so afraid that once I leveled up I’d have to deal with my stat points and skill points being distributed randomly! Remember about my Metamorph ability from being Imoen being disabled due to Imoen’s lack of stats? It’s almost depressing how less physical she was than my own body. Distribute them Harry distribute them now please?!” She pleaded, reaching over and actually shaking Harry.

“All right, all right, hold your horses, I want to see why I didn’t level up.” With that, Harry opened his profile. There he saw that he was kind of close to leveling up. His ‘experience points earned’ green ink was almost half full along the long bar that indicated how much experience points he needed to gain the next level.

In reading the number corresponding to the bar there, Harry nodded slowly, realizing that since he was Level Five already, and each level was about half again as much is the level before he still had more than two thousand XP or so to level up whereas Imoen had barely begun to fill in her bar to get to Level Six.

With Imoen vibrating in eagerness to add to her stats, Harry deliberately took a bit of time to open the next few screens. Teasing her like this was fun, and there was a lot of things he wanted to learn about how his Gamer ability impacted combat, especially how different it was in comparison to how it was normally for people in this world. Of course he’d probably have to wait to answer those specific questions if he ever could, but at least there were a few things he could figure out right now. This included looking to see what he could find about what it meant to be in a party, and how that impacted combat. All these messages were in gold, lined with black.

“Congratulations, you have worked together with your party member to kill your enemies. Note, when part of a party, experience points are distributed evenly, with additional **reputation points** going to the killer of any particularly strong monster or a doer of some other kind of great deed. An example of this would be killing a particularly high level monster, human or other sentient being.

Notice: Reputation Points can be colored by the nature of the action taken. If you, say, walk into a house and kill all the people within, that too gains reputation, the negative kind. If you invade a bandit hideout and wipe them out while freeing their captives, that gains you positive reputation points. Fall into the negative numbers, and you will find people you interact with treating you like the village leper, only without the charm. Gain reputation, and people might treat you better than they normally would their fellow man.

Notice: At this moment your reputation is: **zero**. You are unknown to everyone but your closest acquaintances, even people back in Candlekeep do not think of you overmuch, positively or negatively.

Furthermore, combat builds trust. There is no such bond as the bond between men, or women, who face battle together. Your trust with your companions will go up slowly but surely in combat situations in which you and they perform well.

Notice: Your relationship level with Imoen is **Family**. Imoen will receive a +4 to damage and +6 to defense while part of your party.  The odds of activating dual attacks, combo and other team-based attacks is increased with every relationship level, and certain skills and abilities can be shared between party members.

Notice: the active ability Backstab, normally a thief only ability, has been added to both your combat abilities. It will be added as an active buff under the right circumstances i.e., when you can actually do so. Congratulations, you can now stab people in the back. Aren’t you special?”

Ignoring the sarcasm from his Gamer ability, if it could even be called his, Harry was face broke into a smile, the first one that had shown on his face since Gorion had died. “That is awesome!”

“You better believe it Harry! This body of mine doesn’t have enough strength or skill with any weapon to really do much damage with any weapon but a whip at this point, and even then I’d only be good for stinging. Backstab though, makes me actually useful in hand to hand combat without my needing to rely on my blood mage spells,” Imoen said with a grin. “And I bet it will help you too when we can get around to using it.”

Nodding at that, Harry moved on, ‘clicking’ on the information which would describe what a party was meant to be.

“Congratulations, you have formed a party with Imoen! Parties are groups of individuals who have decided through friendship, Fellow feeling, or a shared goal to work together. Party members can share experience, distribute loot evenly between them, create dual attacks, combo attacks, and during combat will share both active and constant buffs. For example, you have learned the thief style Backstab. This is a thief only combat ability normally. You cannot learn thief only out of combat abilities such as detect traps.

Further, Imoen cannot in turn learn Turn Undead. This is a paladin skill based upon the religious learnings that you have gone through up to this point. But the aura of Turn Undead will spread out from her as well as you, the Gamer, when you activate the skill yourself. However, once you learn Power Strike, which is an active skill that warriors, paladins and other close combat types can learn, as a party member, Imoen will be able to learn it in turn. Further, Imoen’s inactive combat buff ‘Fight Like a Jack Rabbit’, can carry over to you, so long as you are well enough to use it or not encumbered.

“That was sort of informative,” Imoen mused. “Although I get the impression that a lot of this is because of your Gamer ability Harry. The whole sharing thing I mean.”

“Are you going to argue with it?” Harry asked, sounding a bit more like himself now, as he got into the mystery and continued to learn about his Gamer ability. “Personally, I’m more interested in combos and dual attacks.”

It turned out that dual attacks were simple enough. All that meant was that to two or more party members attacked the same target, adding to their chances of getting through its guard and/or its armor.

Combos were a little trickier. These kinds of attacks built on one another, creating a greater effect than any single attack of a similar level of skill would have in the first place.

“’For example, if you have two mages in the party, and one uses a fireball spell, and the other a slick oil spell, well, you can just imagine what would happen. Goodness, gracious great rolling plains of fire’,” Harry read aloud, then looked over at Imoen, whose grin had become positively manic as she went into her happy place for a moment.

“I am **so** going to be a wizard when I get the chance to dual class!” She shouted suddenly, thrusting her fist into the air again.

Harry shrugged at that. “I’m looking forward to being able to heal and getting more Turn Undead spells under my belt. Face it, without that, we would have been in a very bad way to last night against those ghouls.”

“Reread that stuff again Harry about sharing skills,” Imoen said becoming serious again. After Harry did so, she nodded slowly. “All right, it is a game changer, no pun intended. But this working as a party thing, it’ll force us to think about tactics instead of just going all in and charging. I wonder though, since we’re in a party like this, does that mean that you’re the party leader? That you could actually give me orders in battle even if I don’t agree with them?”

Harry blanched, then asked hesitantly, “Wait, did you feel compelled to follow my orders when we were working together during the battle?”

Cocking her head, Imoen tried to think about what she had felt during that fight, beyond the adrenaline the fear and the exultation of combat anyway. “I think I felt a little tug, maybe? But I had agreed and went along with your plan because it made sense.”

Harry thought about it too, and murmured, “trust goes both ways.” Imoen looked at him and he shrugged his shoulders looking a little embarrassed. “Trust is part of a relationship, whatever that relationship might be. I think that if you didn’t trust me, you might have been able to fight off that effect, and maybe go your own way, but because you didn’t, we worked together. But if you didn’t trust me, even if I trusted you, we wouldn’t be able to work together, and the buffs wouldn’t cross over.”

“That makes sense,” Imoen said with a nod. “Now, what are those two other large messages, the ones in gold and red.”

Seeing as gold was the color for important messages, Harry had left them for nearly last besides quest messages, which he knew were shown by orange boxes. He now clicked on them, his eyes widening.

“Congratulations, as a party leader, you have unlocked a new inactive skill: **Leadership**. You are the leader of your party, and as such, your charisma will be enhanced. People who join your party will defer to you however subtly. Further, you will see a willingness to follow your lead based upon how much trust your actions or words have garnered with them.

Your Leadership level is 0. While you lead your party, that party is not only too small to matter, but your ability to lead them is mostly untried.”

Reading this aloud, Harry became very worried. “That, that sounds like I’m trying to, I don’t know, control them through a mild confusion spell or something. I don’t like that idea one bit.”

“No Harry it doesn’t.” Imoen said quickly before Harry could worry himself into a tizzy. “Some people just have a certain charisma, which can convince other people to follow them. It’s nothing to do with spells and it’s nothing they force upon other people to do. It is just that some people lead and other people follow. I know I’m a follower, with a tad bit of hero worship thrown in,” she added bluntly, thinking about how she had felt about Dumbledore for so long. “I’d hate trying to lead, and I’m more than happy to follow someone else.”

When she put that into words, she could see Harry calming down, and had to hide a grin. Whatever his Gamer ability thought, Harry’s ability to be a leader had nothing to do with him forming a party, he had already been a leader before this. She had seen how people deferred to him back in Candlekeep. Even the Seekers had deferred to them at times, coming to him with questions about this or that book that they knew Harry had read. That was nothing to when he was in the kitchen. The Seekers and workers assigned there followed his orders there as if they were gospel. Even when he interacted with guests or the other servants Imoen could see it.

That was a very small sample set admittedly, but she also remembered stories about how he had gotten people to follow him back in their own world and how she’d followed him in this fight. It wasn’t every 12-year old who could convince his friends to follow him into the unknown like he had in trying to get past the locked door on the third floor. She hadn’t even tried to take over from him, in spite of the fact that she had more combat training than he did.

After recovering slightly from his moment of concern, Harry kept reading. “Leadership is based upon your overall experience, charisma, and the trust you build within your party. The more time you put into building trust or gaining reputation the more you get out of it. Eventually leadership can allow you to have several status buffs when dealing with other people in terms of commerce, combat, espionage, dealing with local governmental authorities, and even becoming an authority.”

“I wonder what that means, ‘by becoming an authority’?”

“Maybe becoming a noble?” Imoen replied scratching at her cheek thoughtfully. “That would be kind of cool I’ll admit.”

“Maybe, or maybe since I’m a Paladin, it means that my leadership skill will help me to gain recognition or high office?” Harry said with a shrug. “I’m not certain how I feel about that honestly.”

“Well, leave it for now. That message is right, since it’s just the two of us, I doubt leadership is going to matter much in the short term. What’s the next one say?”

“Congratulations, as a party leader, you have unlocked the inactive skill: **Tactics**. A tactician is someone who sees opportunities or dangers in the most mundane of settings, can plan ahead and can turn events to his advantage. Where one person would see a hill, a tactician would see a high place to put his archers so that they can command the battlefield. Where a normal person might see a tree, a tactician could see a lookout position, a trap ready to be made, or a shadow for his thief to hide in.

Your tactics level is level 1. You are able to command your fellows and put them in a position to do damage, but the use of terrain, and the idea of planning ahead for combat still eludes you. You will gain only 25% chance to succeed to any command given to a party member. Make decisions, command your party in battle, and lead them to victory, and your tactical ability will level up, opening further features and buffs for you and your party.”

“Now that’s interesting,” Harry said scratching at his own lightning scar, which Imoen had recognized as something he did when he was thinking hard. “They are both inactive skills, but leadership doesn’t say anything about me being able to level it up, whereas tactics is something I can level up through my actions in future fights. That’s interesting. It implies that maybe my choices and decisions in the future will impact my leadership level, rather than simply my actions in battle.”

“I’ll admit that the idea of tactics and gaining the ability to see that kind of thing is great Harry, although again I don’t see leadership as all that important right this second. But can we get the leveling up now?!” Talks growled.

“I want to read the journal entries first,” Harry said mildly, but acquiesced when Imoen made little grasping moves with her hands towards his throat. “All right, all right! Let me just see if I can open your status screen.” He looked at her, then pushed out of finger towards her, stabbing something right above her head, where he saw her name as he intoned status screen.

**Name:**Imoen

**Gender**: Female

**Race**: Human

**Class:** Thief level 5

Strength: (4)

Willpower: (4) +4

Dexterity: (19)

Constitution: (5)

Durability: (4)

Wisdom: (10)

Charisma: (6)

Intelligence: (21)

Luck: (11)

Bloodline Skills:

Metamorph (currently disabled - your stats do not match the needed level to use this bloodline skill), \*\*\*\*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*, Clumsy (permanently disabled, yes it was always a body issue, lucky you), \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

To their surprise, the big of background information on Imoen had changed too.

**Background notes**:

Now fully integrated into the world of the Forgotten Realms, Imoen (the Auror in training formerly known as Tonks) has joined the Gamer in his quest to find his, and therefore her, place in the world beyond the walls of Candlekeep. A thief of some varied skill, a combative personality well used to hitting above her weight level, and an innovative thinker who likes to party as much as stabby, she is the best horrible friend anyone could ask for, the kind you love to hang out with even if it gets you in trouble with everyone else.

In the upper-right corner of the screen, Harry could see the little + that was the sign of Imoen being able to level up, which he clicked on. The same screen appeared, but now there was a new message between Imoen’s class and her stats, while the (+) had disappeared from where it had been.

“You have Leveled up. You have four Stats and one skill point to disperse. Please assign Stat points now. You will then be taken to the skills page.” Beside that message were four red dots, and there was a (+) sign next to each stat line.

When Tonks attempted to try to shift her status points though, she found out that she couldn’t. when she tried to interact with the open page, her hand passed right through. It looked as if even as a companion to the Gamer, she couldn’t use all the abilities of the Gamer. “Oh, come on!”

“I think we just figured out a part where the Gamer ability is different from everyone else’s ability to level up in this world,” Harry said thoughtfully. “I’d wager that while experience is the same, only the Gamer can freely manipulate his stat points. Whereas you, since you used agility and the thinking skills, I bet that your stat points would’ve automatically gone into the typical thief stuff, dexterity, intelligence, and luck, maybe. Certainly your stats look like that’s what’s happened so far.”

“But since you’re the Gamer, and I’m your party member, you can distribute them for me, while I can watch, but still can’t do it myself!” Imoen grumped. “I can’t say I’m exactly happy about that, but since I have no interest in leaving you on your own, Harry, I can go along with it for now.”

She winked at him, her anger instantly dissipating, and Harry smiled back, Gorion’s death firmly pushed to the back of his mind as the two of them read these messages. Imoen was not so foolish as to believe he was fully over it even with that weird Gamer’s Mind bloodline skill, but she would be there for him when he broke down at night, when the nightmares would come. For now, forcing him to learn more about his abilities, and what they could do with them, was the most important thing.

In the next moment however, Harry’s face went back to the blank expression it had been, as both he and Imoen read the journal entry. It read like the more officious overarching world messages.

**Chapter 1:**

**Dawn has broken on the day after your life has been changed forever. Ambushed the evening before, you were forced to fight for your life only to see Gorion cut down before your eyes, even his powerful magic unable to stop the onslaught. It was his wish that you flee, but that does not remove the feeling of rage or bitter regret that now overwhelms you. The armored fiend had said he would kill you too, and even seemed to imply he was after you from the start, just like the murderer who tried to kill you back in Candlekeep. If only Gorion had given you some clue as to why someone could be after you, but now he is gone, and you are lost. Candlekeep is near, but you will find no quarter there. The readers pay for their serenity with rather draconian entry rules, and without Gorion's influence, their doors will remain closed.**

“Chapter 1,” Harry mused, grinding his teeth a little at the reminder of Gorion’s death but otherwise not reacting. “I wonder how many chapters there are, and if they have something to do with the game, or if we are going to be able to affect them in some way.”

“I honestly don’t think we’ll ever be able to figure that one out until we actually start doing it Harry, so why don’t we just go on to the next bits,” Imoen replied softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. That next bit happened to be another journal entry, but this one was in the quest log portion of the journal.

“A main quest has been added to your journal: **Vengeance or Justice**! With Gorion’s death, your purpose becomes clear. You have decided to set out and find his killer as well as the reasons for his death. What did that strange armored giant mean when it said it would come for you? Was your death the end goal of this strange man’s machinations, or simply a means to an end, and if so why? This journey will teach you both about yourself and about your place in the world, but one thing is clear at the outset, you must search for your answers.

And when you have those answers, you Harry, will have to decide what to do with it. Will you seek out vengeance, brutally murdering your way through the Sword Coast to get your answers? Or will you serve justice, searching for your answers yes, but also aiding the people you meet, solving the problems plaguing the various people around you, and becoming a true paladin one who can be an inspiration to all? Only time, and your choices along the way, can tell.”

“As if I’d ever let you just search for vengeance and murder everyone that gets in your way, Harry,” Imoen said, rolling her eyes. “That was possibly the least informative quest thing I’ve ever seen, honestly.”

“I think that’s probably because we’ve already set out on the first steps of that path,” Harry mused, once more scratching at his lightning bolt scar as he stared at the journal entry hovering between them, with Imoen leaning against his side companionably. He had stiffened when she first leaned against him like this back in his room in Candlekeep, but he had since gotten used to these little cuddle type touches from her and took them as a sign that the two of them were close friends, something like the way everyone was on the Quidditch team occasionally. “Shall we go on to the next one?”

When Imoen nodded, Harry clicked on the other two quest logs. The first one had the heading of ‘Iron Intake Issue,’ and Imoen groaned. “Oh god alliteration, really? Please don’t let that be a trend! That kind of thinking get as old as puns, and that quickly.” Ignoring her, Harry looked at the information underneath the header.

“Gorion had evinced a high interest in what had been going on with the iron coming up from the south, and the fact that poor iron quality might cause a war between Amn and the city-state of Baldur’s Gate. Perhaps his interest, and the interest of the Harpers, of which he was a retired member - if anyone can be said to truly retire from such an organization - could be tied into the attack on the two of you by the armored giant. Although why he would be after you would become a separate mystery in that event, it is still a place to start if you so desire. And after all, didn’t Gorion say that you might meet new allies on the road in searching for the reason behind this problem?”

“That seems self-explanatory too Harry,” Imoen said with a nod. “I’d wager that if we decide not to look into these friends of Gorion’s they won’t be willing to help us in turn. Did he tell you anything about them by the way?”

Harry told Imoen about what Gorion had said about his two friends, which hadn’t been much, but he did agree with Imoen that was very easy to see that they would have to look into this issue to get on the Harpers good side. And after all he’s finished, the Harpers are a kind of secret spy right? If anyone can figure out stuff about this giant that killed Gorion it’ll be them.”

With a nod, Harry and on to the next side quest, which read ‘Pray for Your Future’. For a moment Harry and Imoen just looked at it, then both of them as one raised a hand and slapped it to their faces, groaning aloud. “Really, cocking really!?” Harry muttered shaking his head. “Bad jokes, now?”

“Well, we’ve seen before that your Gamer side seems to have a sense of humor, when it isn’t in full on Voice of the World mode anyway.” Imoen said with a shake of his head. “The Gamer ability is going to help you a **lot** Harry, so I suppose we need to take it’s very dubious sense of humor in stride.”

With another groaned, Harry began to read the sub quest information.

“Now that you are out and about in the real world, the time has come to choose the deity to which you will swear your service to. Will it be Helm, the Vigilant? Will it be Lathander, the Morning Lord? Willy you serve Illmater, the God of Martyrs? Will it be Tyr, God of justice and righteous war? The decision will be yours but be warned, this choice will have major long-term ramifications, not only for you and your abilities, but how you are perceived by your party and the public at large. Furthermore, once you have made a decision, you will **never** be able to take it back. Unless you fall from grace, thereby losing all of your paladin abilities... and giving yourself a whole new slew of problems.”

Since that also was self-explanatory, despite their shared irritation at the joke in the quest’s title, Harry moved on quickly to the two minor quests below that. These read ‘loot the bodies for clues’, and ‘making certain the dead don't rise again’.”

After exchanging a glance with Imoen, Harry quickly looks clicked on the first one, reading it aloud. “’It’s a long shot, but perhaps one of the armored giant’s followers might have had some paperwork, or other kind of clue that could point you in the direction you need to go from here. Loot the bodies for profit and information’, plus 300 XP.”

The next read:

“in this world, unburied corpses can become a danger to anyone, rising as undead ranging from skeletons, to ghouls, all the way to skeleton lords and Lichs depending on the level of the deceased, the anger and emotions they died with, and any surrounding magic in the area around them or on their persons. Make certain that your former enemies do not return for an encore in any way you can devise.”

“Well, neither quest is worth a lot of experience, but I suppose that we do need to get on with it. And…” Harry said, looking over to where Gorion’s body still rested, waiting for its own burial if they could do it. “I suppose we need to do something with Gorion’s body as well.”

Imoen wordlessly moved over to the nearest body, the wizard they had tag-teamed earlier, leaving Harry to move over to Gorion on his own. After kneeling beside his father figure’s body for a long few minutes, Harry sighed and then reluctantly started to rifle through Gorion’s pockets. He found forty gold coins in a small money pouch, three broken daggers, their blades shattered like the sword Imoen had lost last night, and two mana potions, the information of which he read about quickly.

“Small Mana potion. This potion is meant to refill a little bit of a mage’s mana. Mana, as well as the spells a wizard or mage has in their spellbook, determines what spells a mage is able to perform per day. Each spell comes with a mana cost, visible to the mage or to the party leader if they have enough trust between them. If a mage cannot meet the cost of a specific spell, the spell cannot be performed, hence the need for potions like this.”

*I wonder if I could use this potion to get out of having my health to power our ‘Blood magic’ spells*, Harry mused, before moving on with his search.

In Gorion’s other pocket he found two notes in parchment covered in a wax tube. One of them was a note, a letter of introduction that harry was to use should anything happen to Gorion and he met any of his ‘friends of the trail’, which Harry knew to mean fellow Harpers and perhaps others. The second was a note that went a long way to telling Harry how Gorion had found out so much about the Iron Issue despite never leaving Candlekeep. “Imoen, come take a look at this.”

Imoen turned from where she had been looting the corpse of the mage, hurrying over at the interest she heard in Harry’s voice. “What is it?”

Harry held up the parchment he found, then opened it, so that they could both read it together.

“My friend Gorion,

Please forgive the abruptness of this letter and the manner of its arrival, but time is short. What we have long feared will soon come to pass, though not in the manner foretold, and certainly not in the proper time frame. As we both know, forecasting these events has proved increasingly difficult, leaving little option other than a leap of faith, in many ways.

Despite my desire to remain neutral in this matter, I could not, in good conscience, let events proceed without some measure of warning. The other side will move very soon, and I urge thee to leave Candlekeep as soon as this message reaches you with your young charge. You know they will come for you both, you for the threat you are now, and him for who he is. The open road may seem equally threatening, but a moving target is much harder to hit, regardless of how sparse the cover. A fighting chance is all that you can reasonably ask for at this point.

Should anything go awry, do not hesitate to seek aid from travelers along the way. I do not need to remind thee that it is a dangerous land, even without our current concerns, and a party is stronger than an individual in all respects. Should additional assistance be required, I understand that Jaheira and Khalid have responded to your overtures already and can be found at the Friendly Arm Inn. They know little of what has passed between us, what we were working on and what you were guarding, but they are ever thy friends, and will no doubt help however they can.

Luck be with us all, as I am very afraid we will all need it. I sense the Time of Troubles is not done with this world just yet.

Signed, a man who is truly getting too old for this,

E

“Well, that was… bloody freakin’ cryptic. Honestly, this guy sounds as if he’s talking about prophecies but doesn’t want to give anything away to anyone who could read this,” Imoen grumbled. “It sounds like a big fat conspiracy though.”

“A big fat conspiracy that has something to do with me. The armored giant really was after both Gorion and me. For different reasons but… this is making me feel far too much like the whole ruddy Boy Who Lived Nonsense.” Harry said, scowling.

Imoen had nothing to say to that. After a few minutes talking about what this meant, and who this ‘E’ could be, she went back to looting the bodies of the dead elsewhere, leaving Harry to keep searching Gorion’s bodies.

The next thing he found was hidden in a small, very well-crafted pouch under one shoulder, invisible to anyone seeing Gorion in his jerkin and even hidden to the touch until Harry had put his hands underneath the shirt. Pulling the item out, Harry held it up to the light, staring at the tiny, exquisitely crafted harp. It was about as big as two fingers, and every little detail on it was perfectly etched out, with numerous little etched designs on the wood. It even had real strings between the two arms of the harp, although they were all broken now.

After that, Harry found a necklace around Gorion’s neck. It was a simple, thin silver chain with a small square locket. Inside it was a tiny painting of a young Harry and Gorion. Gorion looked younger of course, his hair a solid brown rather than a mix between brown and white, but other than that he looked the same, smiling jovially towards the painter. Harry’s own painting looked like an odd mix of his new body, the one he’d created for himself and his old body, he one Harry Potter had been born with. He was taller and broader than Harry remembered being back in his old life, but the lightning bolt scar and the messed up hair and the thin face was the same, as were his eyes.

For several minutes Harry just stared at it, ignoring the few popup screens he saw to one side, his Leader ability telling him what Imoen had finished her own search and with it they had finished looting the dead. Instead he was working on the question of if he should take this keepsake with him or let it here with Gorion.

After a few minutes pondering that question, Harry decided to leave the necklace behind with Gorion. He already felt wrong on taking everything else the man had been carrying with him. *Let Gorion take this with him at least. I won’t take it from him.*

Once he was done with Gorion’s body, Harry moved over to join Imoen, and between the two of them performed the grisly work of piling the bodies of the gnolls, the human attackers, and even the heads of the undead ghouls, up in one place and setting them on fire. It was either that or the even grislier task of chopping heads off and removing them from their bodies, and neither Imoen nor Harry was up to that.

With that done and noticing that the experience they had gotten from those two tasks still wasn’t enough to level him up, Harry turned his attention onto distributing Imoen’s level up stats.

When they opened up her status screen, Imoen interrupted. “Wait, can I see yours?” She blanched a second after that left her mouth, but thankfully the joke flew straight over Harry’s head, and she breathed a sigh of relief as all he did was open up his own stat page.

**Name:** Harry Potter.

**Gender**: Male

**Race**: Human

**Class:** Paladin level 5

Strength: (19)

Willpower: (11) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (8) + 7

Charisma: (11) +4

Intelligence: (6) +11

Luck: (8) +/- 4

Bloodline Skills:

Potter Luck, Gamer’s mind, Parselmouth, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*, \*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**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 there something deeper, something…sinister at play? Regardless, Harry will have to face it as it comes.

The two of them compared them side to side, and Imoen whistled. “Is it, is it normal for a level five thief to be that far behind a level five paladin? You have fifty-two more points than I do, minus the four we haven’t distributed yet.” After working through the tutorial and Imoen’s life up to that point, Imoen/Tonks had eighty-eight stat points, with four to be added. Harry had a hundred and forty.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think so, Gorion mentioned that I had quite high stats for my level several times,” He laughed shaking his head. “Not that I was all that high obviously, Gorion’s stats were much higher than mine all around, although they were also a little more eclectic than you would think when he told me about them. He had points in everything well into the thirties, and his wisdom and intelligence were in the sixties. Now come on, tell me where you want your points to go.”

That was easy for Imoen. She put two into Strength, which had the immediate effect of adding a further ten pounds to the weight that she could carry, which had been a measly thirty pounds. She put one in Intelligence, which was already her strongest stat, but which would become important if she was able to reach level twelve and could then choose a second class. The last point went into Constitution, which again was horrendously low for her.

“All right, now that I can hold more, I want some more arrows, a second short bow,” Imoen muttered, looking through the pile of stuff that she had taken from the dead bodies. “And another sword and a staff.”

“What about your skill point?”

Imoen blinked then whirled like a cat, moving back to Harry quickly. “Right, yeah, show me my skill sheet.” She paused in thought, then added, “And yours too.”

Once more, Harry pulled up both of their sheets to compare them side by side, noticing almost immediately that the skill sheet didn’t show the Blood Mage stuff.

**Harry Potter Skill List**:

Weapons Skills:

Weapon and Shield \*\*\*

Longsword \*\*

Warhammer \*

Life Skills:

Master Chef: You are a master of cooking and can make even the simplest meal a treat. Chance to cook something other people will find amazing, 42% chance rate.

Loremaster: Thanks to your growing up in Candlekeep and your desire to learn, you have begun to learn how to identify items. Chance to identify unknown objects, 22% chance rate. (Note, this percentage can go up through use)

Natural Charisma: Despite what Harry might think sometimes, he does have a natural ability to draw others to him: Chance to have people react positively to you, 17% (Note, this percentage can go up or down through personal choices)

Class Specific Skills:

Turn Undead: Percentage chance to turn undead into ash, 25%. Can be used five times per day.

All other class specific skills are locked until the Gamer has chosen a god to follow.

Miscellaneous:

Leadership: 0

Tactics: 1

Besides that, was Imoen’s skill sheet:

**Imoen Skill Sheet:**

Weapon Skills:

Short Sword \*

Dagger \*

Staff \*

Short bow \*

Life Skills:

Friendly: You are friendly by nature and can bring out the talkative side in everyone around you: ability to learn something new via discussion 50% chance rate to learn important information.

Flirty Little Lass: You are flirty and able to grab the attention of men anytime you choose, and even sometimes make them do what you want them to do, 42% chance to confuse men, for various effects.

Reading Your Opponent: You are a master of body language and can often spot when people try to lie. Plus 20% chance to spot a person’s true feelings or goals when talking to them.

Class Specific skills:

Pickpocket: 62 percent chance to successfully (get away with it 52%)

Hide in Shadows: chance to successfully hide before you go all stabby, 65%, depending on your environment

Detect traps: 23% chance to spot a trap before you or your allies get caught in it.

Set Traps: 14% chance to create something that could make your life easier.

Pick Locks: For the LOOT!! Chance to unlock those pretty chests, 29%

Unlike Harry’s skill sheet, Imoen’s didn’t have a place for miscellaneous skills, yet. Harry figured she might be able to learn something later. And when she tried to get Harry to add a second skill point to the short bow skill, it didn’t work. “It looks like thieves can’t have more than one skill to any weapons proficiency,” Harry said with a shrug. “Any other choice?”

Imoen growled but told him to put it to sling. It was clear to Imoen that she could never fight someone up front just now, and she already had skill points in dagger and short sword, which filled in the short rang needs of Backstab. All her other skills would need to be shifted to keeping her out of the reach of their enemies.

Once Imoen was satisfied, Harry nodded over towards where Gorion still lay. “We’ve put it off as long as we can,” he said with a sigh. “Come on, it will go faster if we both work on it.”

**Because the ground was so rocky where they had fought, Harry and Imoen were unable to dig a grave, and as battered as they still were, their health points not having grown back much, they didn’t want to use their Blood Magic spells. Instead they had to create a cairn, placing rocks over Gorion’s body. Once finished, they stood staring at Gorion’s final resting place, with Imoen placing her hand on Harry’s shoulders, but leaving him to his thoughts. She had only been in the game for a short time in comparison to Harry, and she had not been nearly as close to Gorion as Harry had become, but she knew how she would feel if her father had died back in their old lives.**

There moment of introspection was interrupted by a loud female voice shouting to the right of them. “Ho there, young ones.”

The two of them turned, with Imoen’s hands dropping to her sword, and Harry’s flashing to his own with a speed that made Imoen blink. *FUCK,* Harry thought, *how the heck did they sneak up on me like that?* He glanced up to the area map and he realized with a start he actually hadn’t used it the night before.  *I’m going to have to get better at that kind of thing if I want to survive in this world.*

But neither of them pulled weapons out just yet, as they stared at the two people who were making their way up the hill towards them, stopping as they stared at the pile of burning bodies, before moving well around it, and continuing on towards Harry and Imoen.

From here the two from Candlekeep could see that both of them were wearing leather leggings and cloaks, their hoods pulled over their heads at the moment. One was holding a bow in his hands, and a shield on his back, it’s top just barely visible over his shoulders. The other was holding a staff, with what looked like a cudgel at his belt and a slingshot as well. It was only as the two of them came closer that the second figure’s figure was able to be seen, marking her out as a woman.

When they reached the two by the grave, who had yet to answer them, simply watching them come, the woman barked, “Well, what has happened here?! A fire fit to burn the woodlands, sparked by a large pile of bodies both undead and human. Most unusual and dangerous. And two young people who look barely old enough to be away from the farm. What has happened here?”

Her accent was somewhat unique, Imoen thought. It almost sounded Eastern European perhaps, like the accent she’d once heard from an Auror from Russia. *Doesn’t change the fact she sounds a bit of a rhymes with punt though.*

Harry growled taking a step forward angrily. “You come upon us in front of a cairn for the fallen and all you do is bark commands? Why the hell should we answer any question you put to us?”

The woman paused, looking down at the cairn as if only now recognizing what it was, before sighing. “I… Apologize. My husband and I have been traveling for many weeks now, and we were waylaid by several wolf packs last night just as we were going to make camp, then five ghouls after we tried to put some distance between us and the bodies of the wolves. When we saw the fire, we had feared what we would find here.”

“It’s been a long night for all of us,” Imoen said shaking her head. “But if you don’t mind, both Harry and I would like to see who we’re talking too.”

“That, that’s a v-very acceptable req, q, quest,” said the man speaking up for the first time. “And you must ad, d, admit my dear, that, that, they did a very good job moving the bod, d, bodies of the dead away from anything tha, a, that could’ve caught fire.” Unstringing his his bow and slinging it over his back, the man pulled back his hood and pushed back his cloak.

The face revealed when the man pulled back his hood was that of a brown-haired and brown-eyed half-elf. Half-elves had more pointed ears than humans and were slimmer of build than humans tended to be, with a slightly more pointed face than humans, especially around the chin. Their eyes were also a bit larger and more luminous than a humans’ would be. The man wore full plate armor under his cloak of better quality than what Harry was wearing if only in its construction, and his suit was complete with arm and leg guards which Harry didn’t have. The quiver at his side was also half-empty, and as Harry looked at the quiver, he got a notice from his gamer abilities.

“Fire arrow. This special type of arrow will do fire damage due to a spell placed on its tip. Useful for dealing with the undead, trolls, houses and other flammable objects.”

Of course, Harry also got some information when he looked at the man. In the air above him, the man’s name glowed with the blue of an adventurer, and when Harry looked at it, more information popped up.

**Name**: Khalid

**Gender**: Male

**Race**: Half-Elf

**Classification**: Level 32 Warrior

**Relationship Status, Strangers**: 200/1000 Trust, 200/1000 Respect. You’ve only just met, and while Khalid is not going to hold that against you, he certainly isn’t going to trust you either.

That was all the information Harry’s Gamer gift could give him from a complete stranger, as the relationship bar said.

He also had a face made to worry. The man’s face was long, the expression one Harry felt fit the word lugubrious, with frown lines and smile lines around his mouth, drooping eyes, and a twitch to his features to match his stutter.

All this made Imoen chuckle shaking her head. “You’ve got the look of a worrywart to you, but you need a long beard to tangle your fingers in when you mutter to finish the image,” she quipped.

That caused the woman to bark out a laugh as her husband chuckled shaking his head at the odd comment. “Half-elves very are very rarely able to grow facial hair child, it is after all, something elves cannot do.” Her husband looked at her, and the woman seemed to frown within the cloak before pulling her hood back.

**Name:** Jaheira

**Gender**: Female

**Race**: Half-elf

**Classification**: Level 33 Druid.

**Relationship status, Suspicious**: 0/10,000 Trust, 0/10,000 Respect. Gifted with a more suspicious {some would say bitchy} attitude than her husband, Jaheira is not only unwilling to trust you, but is actually openly suspicious of you. Don’t take it personally, she’s that way with everyone.

Unlike her husband, Jaheira wore only chain mail, which matched her druid class from what Harry remembered, although it Harry was now much leerier of the staff in her hand then he had been a moment before. From his readings Harry knew that Druids could do quite a lot of damage with staffs and could place spells on them to command nature around them. And much like a wizard with his staff, a druid’s staff would allow the druid to cast the spells within without the need for verbalization.

Like her husband Jaheira was a half-elf. This meant she a thin rather than curvy body, which made Imoen think happy thoughts as Jaheira looked only to be a B-cup maybe, which was below what Imoen herself had at this moment. *Although if I ever get the chance, the first thing I’m going to morph is my chest!* Back in her old life, Imoen normally went around with a high C, low D-cup at best. And for some reason she missed it a lot in this world.

But even Imoen had to admit that Jaheira’s face was gorgeous. It was a thin, slightly more pointed face than a human’s, with high cheekbones showing her Elven heritage, her skin without pock mark or freckle, her mouth showing no lines around it like Khalid’s. She had a dirty blond hair done up into a series of tight braid along the top while being loose at the back and sides, with tiny cloth wraps around small bits of it, here and there, her hair framing her long, pointed ears. She had light green eyes, almost turquoise actually, under well-cared for eyebrows, and a face devoid of other cosmetics. She had simple banded earrings one to an ear and two tiny scars barely noticeable on her cheek.

“The two of you are married then. Might I ask your names?” Harry asked, looking between the two half-elves*. After all, I can’t exactly say that I’ve already been able to see them.* That was one other thing that he had learned during his time in the tutorial. Other people did not see even a little bit of what he could when he looked at items or people.

“We, we are indeed, and my nam, m, name is Khalid, and thi, i, this is Jaheira. I am sorry for your loss, bu, u but pray, can we have your names as we, e, ell?” Khalid asked.

Harry nodded slowly, looking between the two of them. “Gorion mentioned the two of you,” he said abruptly. “I’m Harry, his ward. But we were supposed to meet at the Friendly Arms Inn.”

“Indeed, we were. But plans changed,” Jaheira said shaking her head, and then pausing as she stared between Harry and the cairn before sighing. “But I believe that your own plans changed even more than ours, and that you ran into trouble far sooner than even Gorion had suspected. Is that not the case?”

Harry nodded silently, gesturing down to the pile of stone that he and Imoen had placed over Gorion’s body. “I’m very afraid it is. We were waylaid last night by a large group of warriors, a few mages, several ghouls, at least one ghast and their leader, a giant armored behemoth. He was at least a foot and a half taller than me, and broader in the shoulders too.”

Harry and Imoen then related the tale of the fight during the night, talking about how Imoen had snuck out of the Candlekeep for friendship’s sake, causing Khalid to nod at her approvingly, and Jaheira to roll her eyes but say nothing. Indeed, neither of them said much. Khalid simply stared down at the grave of their friend crossing his arms in front of him and sighing. Jaheira went to her knees beside it, putting her hand out on top of it, as she began to mutter underneath her breath while Harry and Imoen told the tale.

She built up her power slowly, until it was a light green glow around her fingers, and suddenly, she pulled her hand away, releasing what looked like a small seed from her palm at the same time. It gripped onto the stone of the cairn and began to grow as a message appeared in Harry’s vision.

“Jaheira has used Honored Oak. A Druid only spell, this spell creates a sapling over the resting place of a fallen friend to watch over him in repose. While not very powerful, the sapling will create an area around the grave that will repulse anyone with negative feelings towards the grave itself or the person within. It is a high honor to have the sapling placed upon a grave, one few druids would extend to non-druids.”

“Thank you” Harry said, leaning forward to gently touch the tree, bowing his head formally towards Jaheira. “With the undead we saw last night, and with the ambient magic of this forest, I had feared…”

Jaheira’s eyebrow rose in surprise, then she smiled. It was a smile touched by grief, but it was real, nonetheless. “Gorion was a good teacher I see.” Then she became serious looking between the two youngsters. “But that is all well and good, and we have so far allowed you to prove your bona fides by your story. But Gorion would surely have had something upon his person to prove both who you are, and your connection with him to us when we met. May we see it?”

“So long as you show us yours,” Harry replied, causing Imoen to bite her lip to keep from giggling.

Khalid and Jaheira both noticed her reaction and Khalid laughed, understanding where she was coming from, while Jaheira rolled her eyes. “I see that someone here still needs to be doing a little bit of growing up, do they not?” She said shaking her head before looking at Harry, nodding her head slightly as a message appeared in his vision.

“Congratulations. Your forthright manner along with the respect you showed her, has gained you +10 respect with Jaheira. Keep going and like a mighty woodsman, you might be able to chop that tree down and actually become friends with her… In about 1000 years. Give or take.”

Now it was Harry’s turn to bite his lip to keep from laughing, since he had already determined that Jaheira would be a very tough nut to crack respect-wise. Still, he watched without saying anything as she reached into her person, and pulled out from somewhere, Harry tried not to think of where after all she was a married woman, a small golden harp. It was perfect, and as she ran a light nail over the strings it let loose a low dosage tone, from within could be heard her name. “Jaheira…”

Khalid also brought out a similar harp, although the way he did was more prosaic: simply reaching into a small pouch at his belt. But when he played his finger along the strings, it too sang his name. “Khalid…”

When they finished, another message appeared in front of Harry’s vision. *This is getting old*, he thought, *is it going to be like this every time I meet new people, or is it just because these two can be my new companions like Imoen?* Despite that, he read the message quickly, trying to keep his eyes from giving anything away. *I need to figure out how to maybe shift these messages to mental only or something, like a voice inside my… yeah, no, never mind. Bad idea.*

Jaheira and Khalid have shown you their bona fides. They are Harpers, a society dedicated to keeping the balance upon this world from the shadows. It is a secretive order and like any such they do have enemies, large and small. Joining your rising star to them can be good or bad. Choose wisely.

For a moment, Harry wished that he could speak to Imoen without these two listening in, but really, there was no choice. He and Imoen were alone in this world and the Harpers, for all that they probably had their own long-term goals, could help him achieve his goals. Thus, before Harry could even really think about it any consequences to the act, he had reached into his pouch, and pulled out the small harp he had taken from Gorion’s body, holding it out towards Khalid.

Khalid took it holding it up to the light and sighing as he saw the broken strings. “It will not sing again, a Harper has passed on,” he whispered, before putting it into the same pouch as he had already put his own back.

Jaheira nodded slowly, looking down at the grave. “That proves indeed, the the person within this is our old friend, but we had already known that. And now we know that you had naught to do with his death, else you would not have been able to pick up the enchanted harp. But your own relationship to him is still in the air.”

Nodding Harry pulled out the letter of introduction that Gorion had had prepared just in case something happened to him. “There is another way I could prove myself I suppose,” he said with a sigh gesturing down to the grave. “He had a locket of the two of us, a painting from years ago. But..”

Jaheira shook her head, taking the message and reading it quickly before handing it over to Khalid. “Leaving it there might with Gorion seem sentimental to some extent,” she said shaking her head “but it was well done as well. Regardless of what you think occurs in the afterlife, taking such things into the grave with you can let one rest more easily.”

Congratulations? You have lost -10 respect for sentimentality with Jaheira, but gained +50 to Trust. It’s going to be a bit of a give-and-take with this woman, isn’t it? Your Relationship status has changed to Strangers. She no longer thinks the worst of you. Hooray.

Congratulations! You have won five hundred respect with Khalid. Your relationship with Khalid has risen to Semi-Friendly. While he still isn’t certain about you, he is willing to at least be friendly towards you.

As another notice appeared, saying that “Harry had now tied his star to the Harpers, whether or not this was a good idea will become clear in time.” Imoen spoke up.

“So, you two are the more experienced adventurers,” she said, looking between the two half-elves. “The plan for us was to head onto the Friendly Arm Inn, so is that still a good plan, or do you have anything to add?”

The two Harpers exchanged a glance then shrugged, and Jaheira gestured over their shoulders, already pulling her hood back up over her head, and grabbing up her druid staff from where she had laid it by the cairn. “Other than a suggestion that we get a move on, we have no issue with your current destination, no. Anymore we can talk on the way. Only a fool would stay where the enemy knows where they are, especially one of such proven deadliness. Gorion was one of our strongest, and if he could be overcome, I do not want to meet the individual who did it without quite far more of an argument to hand.”

“Yes, but I have to tell you,” Harry said, grabbing up his own cloak and pulling it on since it did look like it was going to rain again, “that finding the person who killed Gorion is going to be one of my primary goals. I’m all for doing good, I wouldn’t be a paladin in training if I wasn’t, but I want his killer brought to justice.”

“And,” Imoen spoke up again, grabbing up her own cloak and hurrying after the other three “from the way he was speaking, the guy was after Harry here as well, so going after him in turn is just common sense.”

“What, what do y, y, you mean?” Khalid said, turning towards them even as he walked on next to his wife. Their strides were the kind of loping strides that could eat up miles, and Harry and Imoen quickly fell into step with them.

Wincing, Harry decided to just go with it, although he wasn’t certain that he liked the idea of these two near strangers knowing that he was somehow important to the dark armored strangers plans. Sure enough, a second later after he explained it, another message appeared.

For showing trust in near complete strangers you have lost -10 respect from Jaheira, but also won +20 trust from both Khalid and Jaheira.

Harry surreptitiously blinked that message away and fought the urge to reach up and rub at his lightning bolt scar in sheer confusion. *How the heck does that work? Women!*

Harry knew that respect and trust could directly fed into relationship changes from one level to another, although he wasn’t certain what would happen if these two went from near strangers to other levels. Imoen was on the low side for family, but still family, which was a bright status bar which range from light yellow, where she was now, to bright green. Khalid and Jaheira, whatever their official relationship level said, were wary acquaintances at best, and Harry wondered idly how that would work in terms of the party tactics and such. But since they hadn’t been offered a place in his party just yet from the Gamer system or whatever, he supposed that he had to build up the trust before that became an issue.

“That is most strange to my ears, but you have my gratitude for sharing such upfront, even if it was better for you not to do so” Jaheira said honestly, shaking her head. “However, you are correct in that searching for an enemy like that is only right and proper when he has marked you out so. But it cannot be our priority. The Harpers sent us here to look into the iron shortage issue, and we must do that before taking on any personal quests, although the two goals might be intertwined. Do not worry young ones,” she said, her tone becoming that of a stern task mistress almost as she looked at the two of them as they walked along. “Khalid and I will do what we can to guide your steps for now.”

Harry growled, shaking his head and stopping, moving into Jaheira’s personal space, causing Khalid to stop too pressing his hand against Harry’s chest for a moment. “Now hold on a minute! Yes, we might be young, but we are not stupid or unlearned, nor are we as Harpers such as yourself. Yes we will investigate the iron shortage, but if you’re with us, it’s a partnership of equals to a dictatorship with you and your husband telling us what we’re going to do, where to go or whatever. We will discuss what we do together and make a decision together. If you don’t like that, then I’m sorry, friends of my father or not, we will continue on to the Friendly Arm Inn and we can say goodbye to one another there.”

Two messages instantly appeared in front of Harry’s face once more, causing his lips to thin ever so slightly. Luckily that looked appropriate for the moment as well.

Standing up for yourself has gained you +50 respect with Jaheira, +25 trust with Jaheira.

Standing up to his wife has cost you -10 to trust, -50 to respect with Khalid.

*Weird,* Harry thought, not for the first time.

“I, I cannot say that I like that,” Khalid said shaking his head. “Su, r, surely the path of wisdom is t, o, to listen to your elders.”

“Oh,” Jaheira said with a laugh. “And if **we** had done that, would we have even been married, my husband? They are right. This is the start of their journey, their lives away from the nest. They must make their own choices. But you are agreed with us, that the iron shortage must be looked into?”

A quests screen popped up, although Harry would’ve thought had he had already agreed to this. Still, he supposed he had to say it formally, and he nodded, holding out his hands. “Yes, Imoen and I will help you search for what is causing the iron shortage.”

“In that case, oh illustrious leader,” Jaheira said with a faint smile even as she shook Harry’s hand “where do **you** think we should go from the Friendly Arm Inn?”

Imoen laughed shaking her head. “Nashkel of course. Whatever is happening, it starts in the mines, that’s obvious.”

“Although we shouldn’t do it openly,” Harry said shaking his head. “That giant from last night could warn people to look be on the lookout for us, so maybe disguises will be necessary once we reach there. We could pose as mercenaries looking for jobs maybe. And we need to know how far this iron shortage has spread, as well as **how** it has spread.”

“Spot check failed!” A message said in Harry’s line of vision. “Your charisma roll has failed. You have not convinced your audience of your point of view. Get to know them better before trying to convince them that you are right about something like this, young whippersnapper!

“I agree with going to the Friendly Arm Inn and south, but we need to check in along the way at various places to gain some more information about what is going on in the sword Coast. This area is a hotbed of many different political and ideological groups, we need to know the lay of the land before we can figure out where to go from there,” Jaheira said authoritatively. “Perhaps even hunt down some bandits here and there, bandits are, oddly enough, sometimes the best sources for information in their chosen hunting grounds.”

Harry and Imoen exchanged a glance, and once more Harry wished that he could talk to Imoen about the messages he was seen. Luckily at least some of them had appeared in her view too, something he would later learn later that night when they had a chance to talk alone. But for now, they simply communicated with their faces and eyes before Harry turned back to the two half-elves.

“I don’t see a problem with that honestly,” Harry said with a shrug. “We need the experience anyway. I just feel as if we will need to hide our identities eventually when we get to Nashkel.”

This response earned more respect points from both of them, although Harry noted that it was a very small increment for Jaheira, and that he had a looooong way to go before any change in their relationship status happened there. But despite that, he nearly had to grin a manically as he saw the next message popping up, and he heard Imoen gasp to one side although neither of the half-elves responded as Harry finally saw a message he had been hoping for.

Jaheira and Khalid have been added to your party. Warning, party skills and abilities are effected by the trust and relationship status between the party members. Due to their low relationship status with you, party skills are disabled for the half-elves Jaheira and Khalid. However, certain bits of information about that your two new party members are now available and you can see their positions on your map as green (allied) dots on your map.

Whistling quietly, Harry quickly began to ask Jaheira and Khalid about the road to the Friendly Arm Inn, as well as how the two of them and Gorion had communicated, while he indicated with one hand that Imoen should fall behind them. She looked at him quizzically for a moment, before he surreptitiously gestured as if he was punching a button with a finger, then towards the two of them again with a flick of his other fingers.

Realizing what Harry wanted, Imoen fell behind the other two, and then clicked over their heads, where she too could now see their names. When she did, she got a bit more of a status screen than Harry had been able to before although still not much, some background on both of them along with their ability with various weapons appeared, and she read through it, whistling silently. It turned out that though he had been using a bow when they first showed up, Khalid also was very skilled with sword, having two skill points spent there, whereas Jaheira was equally skilled with the sling and staff and club, but also had a point in scimitars. She could even see some of the spells that Jaheira could command, including several healing spells. That was amazing, and she had to grin over their heads at Harry winking at him appreciatively, which caused him to smile back at her.

The four of them continued on throughout the rest of the morning and into the mid-afternoon while the clouds continued to threaten rain but not actually open up on them. Jaheira led the way directing them through the woods a ways away from the actual path leading out from Candlekeep to the main road but paralleling it for the most part in a way that neither Harry nor Imoen had the skills to do without getting lost in the dense woodlands. As a Druid of course Jaheira had both a feeling for the woods and the experience. When Imoen asked, she actually proved to be willing to impart some information about the woodlands as they passed through, her normal caustic and standoffish character giving way to a somewhat kinder, more instructor-like attitude.

Going off the beaten path like this, it was almost inevitable they would run into trouble but even running into trouble taught Harry more about his Gamer ability, and how it differed from what everyone else in this world seemed to be able to do. He paused as they crested a small hill, frowning as he looked around while a message appeared in his vision, it’s outline red and throbbing.

Warning, you have entered an enemy zone. An enemy zone is an area where creatures spawn at intervals and will attack anyone entering the range. These areas vary in difficulty, and can be either a source of good experience, or a good way to die prematurely. Be aware of which is which.

The others looked at him quizzically, while Imoen, who had been a step behind him also paused just as she reached him. She looked at him, nodding slightly to indicate that she had seen the same message, and Harry crouched, looking ahead of them, as if he had spotted something through the woods.

“What is it, child?” Jaheira asked.

Harry was beginning to get tired of that child stuff from her. Even though it was technically true that he was a child, it smacked too much of the way Dumbledore addressed him back in his old life for him to want to take it now. He looked at her irritably but decided not to bring it up just yet. Instead, he pointed out and down into the woods, ahead of them. “I thought I saw something moved out there, something white between the trees,” he prevaricated quickly.

“Spot check failed, Khalid and Jaheira still do not trust you enough to take your word for such things and view your inexperience in a negative light.”

“If there was something there child, I would have seen it, or at worst sensed it through the feel of the forest,” Jaheira said shaking her head.

“I, I too would have se, e, seen it, we are after all half-elves, we, e, e, have better eyesight,” Khalid said, smiling companionably at Harry, and reaching out to smack him on the shoulder. “You are just, just a little twitchy after your first battle last night. It happens to a, a, all of us, even paladins are not im, im, immune to such things.”

With that the two half-elves took the lead and headed down the incline of the hill. Harry and Imoen exchanged a glance, then without a word, Imoen took a single step back into a shadow, and activated Hide in Shadows, while Harry pulled out his longsword and moved down the slope ready for trouble.

And just as he had seen, trouble did find them. One moment all was pristine and clear in the forest, then Harry spotted three red dots on his map, which he was keeping an eye on now almost religiously. Before he could shout a warning though, three arrows suddenly zipped out of the forest to the left of them towards Khalid, who gasped, but somehow was able to get his shield off his back their way, in a move that Harry recognized as a skill from the Weapon and Shield skill, much like his own. Another arrow zipped towards Jaheira, but she ducked underneath it, and quickly began to intone a spell.

Jaheira has used Barkskin. Barkskin is a spell that covers the user’s body in a bark-like armor, adding +6 to her durability.

Watching this, Harry couldn’t stop himself even if he knew it was kind of childish. *But then again, despite what my body looks like, at least a part of me is still a 13-year-old right? I’m allowed to be childish a bit right?* With that thought bolstering him, he asked snidely, “Do you believe me now?” as he raced unerringly towards where the three arrows had come from, knowing that Imoen would probably be following him in the shadows.

Running around a massive tree, he discovered the attackers, sixteen red dots on his map, were groups of undead skeletons. There were six archers and ten melee specialists and, all of whom held a large glaive’s in their hands and moved towards Harry as he came towards them.

As he looked at them, information about them popped up from his Lexicon. Reading through it, Harry breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that changed the way the Gamer skill seemed to have changed how it acted once he and Imoen had found out about the lexicon, as any conscious attempt to change how information appeared had not worked up to this point. Now apparently reacting to his desires the instant he met a new type of monster, the lexicon page would splash up a small summary.

Skeletons. Simple undead constructs of bone and sinew these are the lowest of the low in terms of undead, but they can be dangerous in numbers. Unlike most undead, they are nearly immune to fire-based spells on top of their high endurance against dark type spells. But they are still weak against holy magic and are very weak against blunt damage. Swing that hammer paladin, swing!

Seeing no reason not to follow the suggestion of his Gamer skill, Harry instantly dropped his sword back into his item box and grabbed out the warhammer he had taken from Candlekeep as he had his sword. He also shouted aloud “Imoen, wait for it, then target one of the archers!” Then without pause he slammed one hand into his chest as he shouted, “Turn Undead!”

Harry has activated the aura skill, Turn Undead. Chance to turn any undead into ash, 25%

Then he raced forward, bringing the aura Turn Undead created with him. One of the melee attackers immediately collapsed, failing it’s saving throw, and he engaged the other two closest as Khalid raced to join him, shouting out “good, g, good lad!”

Between attacks, Harry was able to watch Khalid in action. Unlike Harry, he didn’t seem to have a secondary melee weapon to switch to, but that was fine by the half-elf. He wielded his sword and shield like extensions of his body, using minute shifts of stance and shield to ward off attacks that Harry had to just block full on with his weapon. His sword lashed out in precise, flashing attacks, stabbing, cutting, hacking at the undead, hitting the portion of their anatomy or armor he was aiming at practically every time.

While Harry knew that the enemy wasn’t one to demand a high level of skill, Khalid still looked impressive to his own, relatively inexperienced eyes. And he and Jaheira worked together like a well-oiled machine. Once Khalid had joined Harry at the front, Jaheira had remained staunchly behind him, using her staff to aim a series of spells into the melee at their enemies, never once hitting Khalid or Harry and always protecting Khalid from an enemy he didn’t see, or entangling the foe he currently faced to let Khalid dispatch the Undead Skeleton more easily.

Between each spell she would use a sling in her other hand, hurling three or four sling balls forward before using magic once more. She did decent damage and aim, but her spells were the druid’s best offense.

Their ability to communicate and work together without words was extremely impressive, although Harry was quick to realize it did exclude him. That would be something they would need to work on, he thought, as his warhammer smashed into the head of an Undead Skeleton, crushing it to powder, while two more moved to engage him.

Just then, Imoen appeared, an arrow taking another Undead Skeleton in the back of the neck, right into its spine. It didn’t go down, but as the message about Imoen having successfully performed a Backstab (with a bow, no less) Harry instantly leaped to the side, moving with that Undead Skeleton when it turned in the direction of Imoen’s attack. As it did, Harry’s hammer licked out above its shield, smashing into its shoulder and neck.

“You have performed a dual attack and a flank attack! Damage increased by X 2.”

The Skeleton, whose health bar had been in the yellow before this fell to the ground dead as Harry’s attack chopped half of its health bar away in a single blow. *Okay, dual attacks might have seemed obvious, but they can be devastating if done properly, and with a bit of tactics.*

For her part, Imoen had taken the opportunity to disappear back into shadows, then came out elsewhere a second later, stabbing at one of her original targets, the four Skeleton Archers standing back of the fight and firing arrows into it. Her attack did crippling damage this time, upending the Archer onto its side. Jaheira took the opportunity to change targets too, and two quick sling stones smashed into the injured archer, taking one of its arms off and again dumping the Undead Archer to the ground.

Harry’s Turn Undead aura cut out, but he instantly recast it, thumping his chest with the same hand, which was wielding his warhammer, shouting out “Turn Undead!” This close the renewed aura caught all the remaining Undead Skeletons in its area of effect, and four of them this time failed their saving rolls, falling into dust. This left six of them, plus the two as yet uninjured Skeleton Archers.

It also made all of the melee combatants turn to him. Harry though didn’t have a problem with this. “Jaheira, use one more Entrapping Vines, then switch targets to the archers. Khalid, pull back around and engage them too.”

“Who are… I was joking about you being our inestimable leader, child!” Jaheira grumped, but since she had just dodged an arrow that could have taken her in the eye and Khalid’s shield had more than a dozen shafts stuck in it, to say nothing of Harry’s, she agreed with this shift of tactics. She obeyed, casting out another spell to cause vines to grow below the feet of the six remaining Undead Skeletons, making it so they could not move, although this time she also caught Harry in it. That too was alright though since he was trapped within hammer range of one of his enemies, with the others unable to come to their fellow’s aid.

Within minutes the three of them had the two remaining Archers fell swiftly. Then the three of them turned and, with Khalid getting out his longbow, started to pelt the captured undead from a distance. Harry took a few hits on his shield, and one hit to his armored chest before they were done, but all in all, even Jaheira had to admit that the tactic had worked out well enough. “Against these weak enemies at any rate,” she added with a shake of her head. “Do not let it go to your head, Harry. Although, I must say you did a good job spotting these Skeletons before myself or Khalid did.”

“In, indeed, you, you also performed adequately when combat began. A bit head, he-he-headstrong, perhaps, and, and your movements seemed un, uncoordinated. Bu, but such things can b, be changed with experience.” Khalid added.

“Congratulations, you have gained forty respect points with Jaheira, seventy points with Khalid. Keep on chopping, woodcutter, you’ll get there eventually… maybe. Your relationship level with Khalid and Jaheira remain unchanged, a big fat neutral.”

“Indeed, you were quite skilled for two so young. But I note that you are moving somewhat stiffly. Were you injured in that battle?” Jaheira asked, showing a more caring side than she had since erecting the Honored Oak.

“Um, no, not really, a few scratches. I did break a rib last night, but I took a healing potion for it.” Harry replied, shaking his head. “Imoen also took a few wounds last night. Heal her first.”

Imoen grumbled at that but since her health bar hadn’t regenerated, said nothing. It seemed as if a slower HP regeneration time was yet another ‘perk’ of being a thief.

“Hah, and in that you show your lack of experience, Harry. Healing potions are well and good, but if you have broken a rib, say, unless the broken portion of the bone has remained where it should, the healing will not be able to repair the damage. You might not know anything was wrong intellectually, but our bodies are often far more intelligent than we thinking, sentient beings like to think.” So saying, Jaheira moved towards her as another message about earning trust appeared in front of Harry.

He was just wondering why he’d earned trust rather than respect points there when Jaheira began to talk, her hands glowing with blue light as she held them in front of Imoen’s face. “Still, it is well that you had me heal Imoen before your own wounds, Harry. While I do not have much time for romantic drivel, seeing to your lover’s physical wellbeing is a different story.”

“What!?” Imoen yelped, while Harry simply gawked at the female half-elf. “Harry and I aren’t like that!”

“Oh? I thought you must be, your leaving your life in Candlekeep behind for him and all.” Jaheira replied, sounding both amused at their reactions and nonplussed at being wrong.

“As for leaving my life in Candlekeep behind, that was a much easier choice than you might think. As for Harry no. Not only don’t I see him that way, we’re practically family really, but I’m so not his type.”

“Hmm, and what is his type?” Jaheira asked, amused to see Harry turn away and move off towards her husband rather than wait around for her to heal him in turn. To see the self-possessed, confident young man be so embarrassed was somewhat amusing.

“Elf girls and bookish types with a penchant for svelte bodies,” Imoen replied with a laugh. “You should have seen how smitten he was with this one Seeker who had returned home recently. I had to practically coach him so he wouldn’t trip over his own tongue talking to her.”

Shaking his head with a low laugh, Khalid patted Harry on the shoulder commiseratingly. “You'll get u, used to it my lad, girls on the m, march can be as bad as goss, gossiping housewives.”

Harry smiled back wanly. “Well, so long as your wife has enough attention to lend us her woodcraft occasionally and your eyesight they can talk as long as they want.”

“Flattery will not work on me child,” Jaheira called out, and Harry could almost feel her rolling her eyes behind him.

“Hahaha, w, well, it worked on me,” Khalid said with a chuckle. “Still, we should get a move on if we want to reach the Friendly Arm Inn by tomorrow night.”

**OOOOOOO**

Back in Hermione land, there was much gnashing of possibly overlarge teeth and raging. “What the heck is going on with Harry!? First that message, now Headmaster Dumbledore, the headmaster himself, basically told me to mind my own business and forget about him for a time and I can’t even, ooh, I just know that boy’s gotten himself into trouble somehow!” The bushy-haired Gryffindor snarled, pacing around her room, one hand clenched around the message Hedwig had delivered to her from the Headmaster, which he had sent back to her in reply to one she had sent him one the other day.

Hedwig didn’t reply though, too busy gobbling bacon at the moment which let Hermione continue to rant. After more than two months of getting by on rats and mice, Hedwig had her priorities now that she was living with Hermione full time. The fact Hermione had her working every day, was another factor behind her hunger.

“All this talk about experimenting on a computer, using magic to fix such a complicated piece of technology, ugh what was that boy thinking!? But of course, he probably isn’t thinking, he never does, ugh Gryffindors, why am I in that house again? And why, if, if he’s… why can’t even the Headmaster give me any information!?”

Deciding the bushy-haired one had vented her spleen enough, Hedwig looked up from her meal at last, precking harshly at her, and adding a glare for good measure.

This caused Hermione’s angry monologue to skid to a halt, and she looked between the owl and the message in her hands, sighing as her anger, always caused more by worry for Harry rather than anger at him, dissipated. She reached out a tender hand, stroking the back of Hedwig’s head and down into her plumage. “Forgive me Hedwig, but, well, I had so hoped that whatever had happened to Harry would be a momentary thing, and it doesn’t look like that is at all right. To have you refuse to return to him, that can only mean he’s out of your reach somehow, but even then there was hope. Now, with the Headmaster shutting me out, I just don’t know what to do.”

Hedwig precked again, this time in tones of deep sorrow, nipping at Hermione’s fingers as she looked down at the remains of her meal. That had been the first thing Hermione had wanted to do after she read Harry’s letter to her: she had written out on a message the words ‘don’t do anything rash’ in as large lettering as she could fit on the note. But Hedwig had refused to take it. She couldn’t find her human any longer. She could, somehow, tell he was alive, but she couldn’t find him, which infuriated and scared the Snowy Owl in turns.

“Alright… enough ranting Hermione, let’s do what you do best: organize and analyze. Go back to the beginning and work your way on from there.” The young girl moved over to sit down on her bed, nibbling at her fingernails. “Subject one, Harry’s activities. Point one, Harry did try to reach me numerous times, but something was blocking him. I might have only his word for it, but given the, the tone of his letter to me, weeks ago, I can only accept that as truth.”

She looked up askance as Hedwig’s claws flexed, making her perch, which Hermione had bought the day before for her on a family outing, to groan alarmingly. But the bird didn’t communicate anything further, simply glaring straight ahead as her claws continued to flex.

*Right, not going to go there,* Hermione decided. “Point two, because of that lack of contact, which wasn’t only with me, but Ronald, he became a little… manic, in his attempts to try and find some way to escape, physically or mentally from the Dursleys. Not that, with what I’ve deduced about them, I can’t understand that. He then, and this I find hard to believe, made his way to Diagon Alley somehow in search of help to repair a computer. This despite knowing magic and technology often mix in unusual ways.”

“Point three, this mission was helped along by a House-elf, a species of which I most certainly need to find a book about. This house elf warned him about going to Hogwarts, that there was some threat there. And Harry, for reasons he didn’t go into detail about decided that was a good idea and promised not to return. That is… also odd, but perhaps a separate factor.” Hermione continued, counting off points.

Point four, since then, you, Hedwig, can’t find him. This means he is either behind massively powerful wards, wards which aren’t friendly to him, or at the very least not to familiars. Very much not a good thing.”

Hedwig precked, and rolled her head around, as if to say ‘no duh’ in such a way that even someone with the understanding of a teaspoon would be able to understand what she was implying. Hermione though simply nodded and continued to count off points on her fingers.

“Point five. My attempt to find anything about Harry in the muggle world has not done very well, although I was able to find the Dursleys. And thank goodness Harry once mentioned his aunt and uncle’s names. But as far as the nonmagical world is concerned, Harry Potter might as well not exist, which is horribly confusing since I know Harry went to Elementary school, he told me so himself.”

“Subject two, point one, my attempts to ask the headmaster for information, even after sharing the message with him and those two old… gentlemen with him did not in gain me any further information.” At this point, Hermione began to speed up, becoming more incensed.

“Point two, judging by their age, clothing and manner, all three were important individuals in the Magical community but have no understanding of nonmagical technology. We can thus assume that they have no understanding of magic and its interactions with technology. In other words, the so-called experts are not, in fact, experts, and are whistling in the dark.”

“Point three: my continued demands for answers from the headmaster have gone from being brushed aside, to being threatened to remain quiet, and now to simply being ignored beside a ‘we are aware of the problem thank you’ reply **irritates** me, especially since he just reused the response he gave me the second time!”

“Point four, without recourse to the headmaster, many of my contacts in the magical world, my head of house, Madame Pomphrey and Madame Pince become suspect as they are all his employees. Which leaves me with my fellow children to interact with, and there… I am afraid my own personality is against me, as I only had one other friend. Ronald… well I doubt he would know anything unless, did you bring him a message too girl?” Hermione asked, slowing down..

Hedwig righted her head then shook it once in a clear negative.

“Right then. So no trying to get Ronald to help, just as well really. I think… I think that concludes my points. Bugger.” Hermione ignored Hedwig’s look of surprise at her relatively minor curse, thinking hard. “But if the magical world can’t be trusted, then I have to fall back on my nonmagical resources. That means that I have only one way to get more information: by going to the source.”

Convincing her parents to come with her to the Dursleys was actually relatively easy. The two of them had been worried about Harry ever since Hermione had shared her suppositions with them, and three days of inactivity on that point had bothered them almost as much as Hermione, although they too were much more incensed on how little paperwork there was about Harry Potter at all. Hermione’s mother, Emma, couldn’t join them, being on duty at the practice today, but Hermione and her father took his car out that very afternoon.

“Oh my word, it’s like entering a cookie cutter world,” Dan mumbled, as they slowly drove through the area around the Dursley’s home. “Little Whinging is it, do you suppose the local homeowners association gives points for making their houses so alike to one another? Bloody freaky this is.”

Hermione giggled a little at the irony in that statement, having heard from Harry that his relatives had often called him a freak. At first she had thought that was because of his magic, and while horrible, was somewhat understandable. Later on, she realized it had nothing to do with magic, and everything to do with Harry.

Soon enough they were pulling up outside of the Dursleys house on Privet drive, and the Grangers got out, with Dan in the lead as they headed to the door. Ringing the doorbell, they were soon answered by a horse-faced woman who looked at them askance, sending a near surreptitious sneer at Hermione’s hair. “Yes, what can I do for you?”

“I believe I am speaking to a Petunia Dursley?” Dan stated. “If I am, my daughter here has a few questions about a Harry Potter? Is he still staying here?”

“Who?” Petunia scowled. “No, no, there’s no Harry Potter here, you’ve got the right name, but I don’t know anything about a Harry Potter. Perhaps you’re looking for another Petunia Dursley too.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed, staring at the woman. “Perhaps his appearance will jog your memory, Mrs. He’s my age, thin, wears glasses, has a lightning bolt scar on his forehead. He’s always wearing large hand-me-downs.”

At those words there was a rustling to one side, causing Dan to turn in that direction just enough to see the top of another woman’s head peeking out over the hedge separating another house from the Dursley’s. But Petunia looked blank, blank and now getting angry. “I’ve just told you I never heard that name before, and that description sounds far too much like a dirty street urchin to me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to making dinner. It’s, for some reason I seem to be out of practice on it.”

With that she banged the door in their faces, leaving the Grangers to stare at it in some confusion.

“That woman was, I think she was Obliviated of everything involving Harry Dad,” Hermione said with a frown. “It’s a spell designed to remove memories, which ones is controlled by the person casting the spell. That probably means this was a dead end. Darn it.”

“I don’t know lovey, but maybe the next door neighbor who reacted to that name knows something.” That caused the woman behind the hedge to twitch and move off, but a few minutes later, Dan was banging on the front door. “Ma’am, we know you’re in there, we’re just asking questions about Harry Potter, there’s no law against that, or against you talking to us.”

“Please, I just want to know what happened to my friend,” Hermione begged the closed door.

For a moment it looked as if the woman inside was going to just keep ignoring them. But finally, the latch on the door opened, and a female hand gestured them in.

Inside they found cats. Lots and lots of cats. Hermione liked cats just as much as the next girl, but even she felt that any number of them above three was just silly. This house had -yes, she counted them - at least fourteen on this floor alone. That went well beyond silly into the surreal. Still, the woman, who looked like the sort of crazy-cat lady you might picture in a storybook, hopefully had some answers for her and she could put up with the woman’s mild insanity for now. “You’re looking for Harry Potter? And where did you meet him, and don’t lie girl.”

“Hogwarts Ma’am. I’m a witch, a muggleborn,” Hermione replied promptly. “And I’m Harry’s friend, we’ve been friends since last Halloween. We’re also in the same house. But please, tell me what’s happened to him? He hasn’t responded to any message I’ve sent him, and I’m worried.” Hermione didn’t mention Hedwig being with her now. Hedwig was Harry’s, and this woman was a near stranger. “But who are you miss?”

“Arabella Figg, I’m a squib that Albus had looking after Harry.” Ms. Figg didn’t notice how both Grangers stiffened at that as she went on. “Good then. We’ll there’s not much to tell, not that Petunia’d be able to tell you anything. She’s been obliviated of anything to do with Harry, all the Dursleys have, even Marge. Still, I can tell you what happened, or as much as I was able to tell from out here.”

After about ten minutes of explanation, Hermione was both incensed and even more worried than before. As she and her father got back in their car, she was making plans. *If Harry hasn’t been returned from wherever he went, it’s obvious that I was right this afternoon: the headmaster and his so-called experts aren’t going about this the right way. But I still need a* ***lot*** *more information, and if the Headmaster isn’t willing to talk to me about this, then I need to solve it on my own. And if it turns out that there’s no way to get to him, well, I’ll just have to figure one out. A bit of the scientific method and knowing Harry’s starting point may serve where regular magical means have not.*

To do that, she needed two things: one, to know everything about what Harry had done she could, and two, everything the headmaster and his experts had figured out by this point. The second would be very, very hard. *But perhaps I can put the magical world’s fifth estate to good use for once. Get Dumbledore to share as much as we can force him to about his own research into it, maybe the others two.* As for the first thing she needed, thereit looked as if she was going to have to reach out to the Weasleys anyway, but not Ronald this time. No, she needed older, more devious minds for this.

Her parents though were more worried about the threat Harry’s message mentioned, as well as the fact that Dumbledore might well have known about how Harry was being treated at home. Hermione’s attempts to explain that Hogwarts was perfectly safe somehow had her spilling the beans about the Halloween troll, about Ron being a bully at first, and of course the dragon and the end of year adventure. How her parents forced that out of her she didn’t know, but her parents were now determined to try and find her some alternate schooling.

While they did that, Hermione, who had decided that if they couldn’t find Harry she would be perfectly fine with the idea of changing schools, moved on with her own plans. Two days later, Hermione looked up as Fred and George Weasley, with Ronald in tow alas, entered the Leaky Cauldron. She waved at them, and they came over, sitting at her table.

“So, Hermione…” One twin, possibly Fred, George or Gred or Forge, began.

“What kind of mischief…”

“Are you talking about?”

“Your message intrigued…”

“But did not explain much. I hope that…”

“It’s not something so plebian as replacing a stolen library book.” The second redhead finished.

“Aye, and why’d ya go to these two rather than me, eh? Aren’t we supposed to be friends?” Ronald said angrily.

Sighing, Hermione began to explain. It instantly turned out that the Weasleys had no more an idea about Harry missing than she had, and all three of their faces were grim as she finished explaining all she knew about what had been going on. “Ugh, I don’t know what this computy thing is, but mixing magic with muggle stuff, that’s dangerous, especially for something you say is kind of designed to think for itself,” Gred said, setting aside the twin-speak in his seriousness.

“Agreed. Our Dad always says, never trust anything that talks if you don’t know where it keeps it’s brain.” Forge continued. “But… what do you want us to do about it Hermione? If Dumbledore’s already on the case then…”

Here Hermione knew she had to tread carefully. She had begun to see the headmaster in a new light thanks to some pointed questions from her parents and Ms. Figg’s revelation that he knew about Harry’s home life, but the Weasleys didn’t have that. “Um, as intelligent and learned as Dumbledore is, he’s not very… muggle world savvy. I think if I can look at the computer, maybe even the type of game Harry was going to play, I might be able to help his inquiries in a way he doesn’t know to think about.”

Ronald grumbled at the idea of a computy thing being able to play games, muttering “Can’t be near as good as Wizard’s chess, can it? But did Harry show any interest in that, no. Still, yeah, that could help, maybe, if he was shrunk and is playing in the game or somethin’.”

“Okay, but I still don’t see what that’s got to do with us?” Gred asked, rolling his eyes at Ronald’s reaction.

“Well,” Hermione paused then blurted out, “How would you like to help me break into the Dursleys house? I need more information on what happened, and that’s the only place to get it.”

Instantly both twins showed her evil, eager smirks. “Tell us more…” they crooned as one.

**OOOOOOO**

Several days after Hermione had managed some mischief with the twin terrors, Dumbledore reached a decision. “I have to go to Egypt,” he said aloud to the emptiness of his office.

Over the past week Albus, working with a now-reluctant Croaker, had discovered that Tonks had been transported to wherever she was in spirit, but not physically. Thanks to her having activated the muggle contraption within the Department of Mysteries, he and the Unspeakables had been able to get a far better read on what had occurred. Because of that, they knew her physical form and her spiritual-self had been separated, but not destroyed as was the original intent of the Soul Trap. Somehow the rest of the magic on the muggle contraption, especially the house elf magic, had offset the destructive aspect, but not the portion of the runes on that item that separated the soul from the body. And with that knowledge, they now knew exactly what had occurred to young Harry as well.

This did not pair well with the pocket dimension theory, but it was now clear that whatever had happened, Harry Potter did not arrive wherever he was in his own body. Rather, he would arrive as a soul, and then interact with the world at large as a soul. Albus at first had the rather quixotic thought that perhaps in this manner he would be reborn, a soul searching for a body. But he was uncertain about how such a thing would occur.

Regardless, with the odds of finding Harry in his new pocket dimension the next best thing to impossible, Albus had decided to leave that task with the Unspeakables as two questions rose to primacy in his mind: what about the soul fragment that Riddle had accidentally infused with the young baby’s? And how did this effect the prophecy?

Albus had already discovered that the original Riddle fragment, the one that had taken over Quirrell last year, was still alive, so that ruled out the first, positive, outcome. Now, over the work of several days, Albus worked out that the shard in Harry’s soul was also probably transported with him to wherever he was now. That wasn’t good, but it also meant that the prophecy was still active. Yet, if neither were here, did that fragment still constitute a viable anchor for the original Riddle?

To that, Albus could not divine an answer on his own, and it was with a heavy heart that he decided he would need to devote some time to researching Horcruxes, and pocket dimensions. Luckily, both magical phenomena had been first developed by the Egyptians. And the magical portion of the Library of Alexandria was still out there, in small portions throughout the country. While Albus wasn’t looking forward to going to Egypt and needing to deal with the goblins there, who practically ruled the magical side of things in that country, he knew it had to be done.

*I may even have to step down as headmaster if it comes to it. Finding out about how those two phenomena interact is that important. If Riddle, the original fragment, is now truly unkillable because his anchor is so hidden from us…* Albus shivered at the thought, grateful now that Croaker and Moody were on the lookout for other anchors. *That just leaves me to find out if the one in Harry is still viable… and if it is… if it is and Harry ever returns, I might have to go back to my original plan of sacrificing him for the greater good.*

There was no way to separate a soul fragment from a soul like this. It had never been done before, but Albus had studied the scar extensively after Harry had ousted Riddle at the end of last year. The two could not be separated, the only way to kill one was to kill the other. *I had hoped the Soul Trap might have done that, taking the fragment of Riddle as payment, but that was not to be. And if that did not work, then it calls into question everything but the Killing Curse, which would more likely kill both souls. But, but to stop Riddle from rising once more, Harry’s life would be a small price to pay.*

Albus’ musings were interrupted by Minerva slamming the door to his office open, having used the assistant headmaster’s override password to get by the gargoyle. “Albus, have you seen this?!” she nearly shouted, slamming a copy of that day’s Daily Prophet down on his desk.

On it, Albus read the headline, “***Boy Who Lived missing! Dumbledore and the Ministry Clueless! Is this connected to the recent arrest of Lucius Malfoy? The public demands answers!”***

Shaking his head and removing his glasses to rub at his nose, Albus sighed. “One wonders how Rita fits all that into a single headline. Regardless, I had feared this would come out soon enough.”

“What are you going to do Albus? That article, it mentions you by name, and then casts aspersions on where Mr. Potter was left for so long among muggles who abused him. Rita’s going to rile up the mob, and you know that the Ministry will be gleeful to throw you to the wolves.”

“I rather think you are mixing metaphors my dear, but your meaning is still quite clear. Nonetheless, I believe that the truth can be used without much harm done. I was hoping to wait to tell you my dear, but I fear that I must step down as headmaster.” Minerva gasped, but Albus went on unhurriedly. “While the chances of getting Harry back intact decrease with every day that goes by, there is still a chance and I must be free to pursue it into the new year.” *And to hunt down Riddle’s other Horcruxes too.* “For now, I think I will schedule a press conference for this coming Wednesday.”

So busy was Albus dealing with the public fallout, that he never realized that Ms. Granger had not only stopped sending her daily requests for information. She had instead sent a letter stating her intent to transfer.

**OOOOOOO**

It took Harry and the others five days travel to reach the area around the Friendly Arms Inn patrolled by the Arm’s live-in mercenaries. During that time, the four of them had slowly melded into an actual party, as Harry’s Gamer ability put it, at least in some ways. They had yet to run into enough combat to give them the experience needed to work together, and after failing the first time Harry was reluctant to try again to convince Jaheira or Khalid about the necessity of training together.

Khalid was more than willing to train with Harry one on one, and Jaheira was willing to discuss her Druid powers, and talk about their experiences with either of the youngsters, which she still called them much to Harry’s displeasure, made worse by the fact that he thought that his displeasure was part of the reason why she did it. But when it came to be talking about group tactics and working together in a fight, neither of the more experienced adventurers were willing to discuss it, outside of the minimum.

But on the more noncombat side of the ledger, things were looking very good, all four of them figuring out what they could do in terms of their roles in the party. On the march, Imoen was scout, with Jaheira acting as rear scout, and Harry and Khalid in the center, able to react to anything they saw while Jaheira would use her Druid powers to feel out the life force as she called it of the forest as they traveled through. This also put Imoen, who had a map ability like Harry’s, at the front, with his one at the center of their formation.

This had allowed them to get the drop on several groups of wolves and other beasts and had kept them from running into anything unprepared. Khalid and Jaheira put it down to Imoen becoming better at moving through the forest silently and Jaheira’s own Druid abilities, but it wasn’t.

Although, moving through the forest alone was an experience to Harry and Imoen. They both came from a society that had conquered the world around them to a great degree. Even the magicals didn’t live as they would have thousands of years ago for example, instead living in the cities or near the farmsteads of non-magicals, with little of the raw, original nature of the area near them.

But this forest, it was like what Europe might’ve been before the Dark Ages. Before the times of the Romans maybe. An endless forest as far as the eye could see, thick, unyielding, a forest moreover that most certainly had **not** gotten used to humans and other sentient creatures in its midst, whatever the humans and others themselves had done to create their homes and roads. Even the Forbidden Forest paled in comparison to this forest and looking at the map of the Sword Coast Harry knew it actually was quite small in comparison to ones found deeper inland.

When they brought it up, the two half-elves were amused. “Ah, I had forgotten what it was like to be so innocent. But you come from Candlekeep, and I suppose have never truly been far from that mighty bastion of all that is written and moldy.” Jaheira did not mind book-learning, but she disdained those who thought learning was more important than using what you learned in the real world.

“The forest was here before you were born, before even I was born or Khalid for that matter,” Jaheira added teasingly looking over at her husband, who mimed looking affronted quite easily with his normally sour, depressed expression. “It will be here far after we are all dead and gone. The forest has a memory not as we would understand the term, but it still understands. It still knows, and it knows that we are ephemeral, that we are foreign. We will leave, our marks on the world will fade, and it will still be here.”

Around the camp, their jobs settled down just as easily. Jaheira would create the camp, where again, Imoen and Harry would learn something about life on the road. In this case they learned more about how to hide such things from casual observation then either had known was possible, merging the camp into the forest. It was excellent training, since Harry hadn’t figured out a way to link his map to a warning system of some kind. He could tell enemies were on his map, but that was a conscious thing. The map itself wouldn’t warn him of it.

While they went about that, Khalid would head off to hunt for their meals. He was, despite being a warrior who professed to prefer sword and close combat, much better than even Imoen with the bow, which was only to be expected admittedly, although it got Imoen’s back up something fierce.

After the camp was set up, Harry would cook, which was something of a surprise to the two older adventurers their first night camping together.

**Flashback:**

“What are you doing young one? Harry,” Jaheira corrected herself as Harry looked at her with a light glare from where he had just pushed Khalid away from the fire that her husband had just created. “I was about to start cooking us a warm meal, but if you do not wish for one, pray tell me rather than be rude about it.”

“That’s not cooking, that was simply burning with a bare modicum of style,” Harry retorted. He pulled out from his ever-handy item box several different spice bottles that he had bought back in Candlekeep, taken little by little and added into bottles every day back in the tutorial. Given how much of each spice he had, and the amount those spices went for, Harry knew his bottles of spice were actually more expensive than the jewels he had ‘farmed’ during his tutorial. But he’d only sell them a bit at a time, considering that unlike those gems, the spices were also useful.

He then pulled out a few ingredients, and several pans which he’d had the Candlekeep’s blacksmith make for him out of bronze, with no iron in it. It cost him several jewels he had gathered over the time in the tutorial, but again, to Harry that was a very cheap price. He actually had every single pan or other tool he might need to cook in his item box.

Jaheira blinked at it all, a small smile flickered across her face as she once more about her head. “I see Gorion was very proactive when it came to prepare you for the road. I should’ve expected it, I suppose. Although I have to wonder how high your Chef rank is given how much time that can take.”

“We’ll have to see, won’t we?” Harry replied, even as he twitched, since even with his previous knowledge of cooking, Jaheira was right: it had taken him a lot of time to become good at cooking in this world. Primarily because there were no appliances but even so, the fact was he had abused the tutorial in a lot of ways to prepare for this journey.

He and Imoen had talked about that, their stats, and their pasts, and exactly how much to share now and into the future. The tutorial, the whole time starting over thing would remain a secret along with where they came from as long as they could keep it. But even the lie Imoen had come up with to explain some of their abilities such as Blood Magic, would be an easier lie to swallow than the idea of time simply skipping like that to anyone who understood even the simplest concepts of magic. Which, as a Druid, Jaheira certainly would.

“Still,” she went on, staring as Harry continued around the campfire, “it is most interesting that you and Imoen are both able to use your item box so easily.”

“Gorion mentioned that,” Harry replied mildly, as he set the spices he would need for the deer that Khalid had brought in. He had spotted signs of a herd earlier that day. “Something about your item boxes not being so organized?”

“And thus of limited utility,” Jaheira said with a nod. “Very few adventurers are born with the ability that you and young Imoen seem to have been born with. Neither my husband nor I have such a skill, hence our packs. But an item box such as yours is only limited by the physical weight you can carry, and never will you seem to be encumbered. It is almost enough to make one jealous.”

“Enou, u, enough about that,” Khalid said, as he watched Imoen begin to prepare the meat, grimacing as she did so. “I think youn, n, young Harry has time before Imoen is done with her chor, r, chore. Come Harry, I would like to test yo, o, your skills.”

Harry nodded, and not three minutes later was staring up at the stop sky as his Gamer ability intoned “you have been disarmed and floored by Khalid in this spar. You have lost. Remember that the path to wisdom is fraught with peril, and bruises in equal measure. It is how you deal with the bruises that matter the most.

“How did you do that?” he asked slowly, as he pushed himself to his feet. “I thought I had you there.”

“Your stan, n stance was wrong,” Khalid explained calmly. “Your sword was o, o on target, and I will admit t, t, to some surprise at that. But your entire move, mo, movement needs work. It’s almost as if you trained just your ar, ar, arm work rather than see, se, seeing how your swordplay pl, pl, plays into and is built upon the foundation o, o, of your body’s movements.”

Harry grunted irritably at that, and Khalid chuckled. “Do, o, don’t worry, that is a mistake that many young adventurers ma, ma, make. They don’t realize it, because su, su, such lear, learning doesn’t show up in your sk, sk, skills.”

Harry nodded rueful agreement that, then glanced at Khalid’s blade. “Before we go again, can I see your sword? It doesn’t look like a typical blade, not in length or girth.” Harry actually knew it wasn’t a normal sword because when he looked at it, he got a popup of “Unidentified sword, you cannot identify this blade without your party member’s permission.” He saw much the same when he looked directly at Jaheira’s druid staff.

“Of course Harry,” Khalid said with a smile I was wondering if you would notice.

To one side, Imoen snickered shaking her head. “Did you just agree to show Harry your… “

Khalid nodded slowly not getting the joke for a few seconds before his wife groaned. “Honestly child, do you have any maturity whatsoever?”

“There’s maturity, and then there’s not actually knowing what humor is. Those are two very different things,” Imoen shot back, and the two women started to needle one another mercilessly.

To one side Harry looked up from where he had been inspecting Khalid’s Bastard Sword (+1 to attack +4 to defense) and gave it back to the man as they moved softly away from the two women, heading back to the fire.

**End Flashback**

From the start, the relationship of the two women was very odd to say the least. Harry often wondered if this was how it was for women all the time, since it somewhat resembled how Hermione would get along with lavender and Parvati, friends one moment laughing at something or other and then the butt of jokes and needling them back the next. Although laughter was in far less supply on Jaheira’s part. The cool blonde-half-elf replied with half-smiles and eye-rolls most of the time, but she did have a wicked sense of humor.

For their part, the two men got along well enough. Khalid, for all his stutter, was a decent trainer, and Harry created several low-key combat abilities he never even knew about: Stance, Lower Body Strength, and Body Movement. According to the Gamer’s information about them, these skills would eventually re-merge with his already existing skills. But until he mastered them, they would remain separate. None brought a combat bonus with them; indeed, they impacted his overall defense negatively at his current level, but in creating them Harry had activated a quest which would give him two more skill points to add to his abilities, which was major. Imoen had said she had seen much the same thing when taking lessons from Jaheira about how to move silently through the woods.

On a personal level, Khalid had something of a sense of humor, which paired well with Harry given that his social awkwardness did rear its head occasionally even now. Neither took pleasure in needling or making fun of others and spent much of their time talking about the nations Khalid had seen, and the skills needed on the road. Harry learned Khalid loved riding, but had a fear of elephants, whereas Jaheira couldn’t stand being around horses, and had issues with bears. “For some reason, the instant they see her they go wild and attack. No idea why.”

In turn, Khalid learned about how many books Harry had read in Candlekeep, his desire to do good in the world which fueled his paladin training, and other such things. Nothing major on either side, just funny, amusing anecdotes as the two men got to know one another without the shouting and verbal sparring of the ladies.

At night, the four of them would retire to their tents, which Harry had instantly offered to carry in his item box, gaining a few more trust points with the married couple. To Harry and Imoen it was simple common decency to split the party up like that with the married couple having their own tent, and Harry and Imoen their own. It made for some awkward moments for the youngsters, but once Imoen put her foot down and told Harry to take care of his ablutions while she got undressed for bed and vice versa, they were fine.

But it would surprise them that the half-elf couple did not point of fact need a tent for ‘marital activities’ as Imoen had put it when they decided on that. The difference between half elves, and indeed elves, and humans went far deeper than looks, or even the body types each race was genetically predisposed to. Elves were practically immortal, at least as humans understand the term. They could live for thousands of years, and their mental and emotional psyches were built to think in those lengthy terms. As such, they didn’t build, create, propagate, or grow as fast – from their perspective- as humans, and that carried off over into their relations with one another.

While there was a tremendous amount of love and understanding since Khalid and and Jaheira had been together for 200 years by this point, there was no sense of passion as humans would understand. Love yes, and the two always cuddled of a night, but there was no pressing need, be it emotionally or physically, to take it further than that so often. A few times a month was enough for more than that, and even that was more than many purely elven pairings would indulge in, in their own lands. That wasn’t to say they weren’t passionate. They simply directed those passions differently.

Instead two of them would talk, or read books, and other such activities. Of course, now that they were no longer alone, they talked about the two youngsters, more often than not speaking quietly about the oddities they had begun to notice even upon that first day with them.

“It is strange,” Jaheira said the night before they broke out of the woodlands, as she pulled off her feet and began to massage her ankles and arch, sighing with a faint smile on her face as she did so. *Time for new boots, methinks.*  “I tend to notice it more in Imoen than Harry if I am honest, but there are, I would say emotional and mental moments of, of disparity perhaps? The mental and emotional maturity that they show is not quite matching to their physical age?”

“I understand what you’re say, say, saying,” Khalid replied with a nod, still stuttering his words despite it being only the two of them. Most didn’t realize this, but Khalid’s stutter had nothing to do with shyness or anything of that nature, rather it was lasting damage from a spell that had gone wrong in spectacular fashion when he was nearby. “Im, Im, Imoen comes off as more mat, mat, mature than her years suggest. Sub, sub, subtle ways, how s, s, she holds herself, the way Imoen m, m, moves her body, even how she looks a, a, at Harry. She is sup, su, supposed to be the younger of the two, but how she ac, acts towards him, you would not know it.”

“Exactly, and that despite his taking the leadership position between the two of them. Whereas Harry shows an almost childlike immaturity at times, especially when it comes to missing Imoen’s more ribald jokes. But that is a minor mystery in comparison to the large one that I believe we have both noticed in Harry,” Jaheira replied.

“In, in, indeed,” Khalid said with a slow nod, staring through the closed flap of their tent towards the other tent, where his half-elf hearing could make out the noise of conversation, punctuated by a laugh from Imoen. He smiled hearing it. Imoen was certainly the life of the party in terms of her personality and getting the others to talk. Harry seemed to almost have something of a brooding personality at times, which was perfectly understandable given Gorion’s recent demise, but Imoen refused to let him remain that way for very long before she would cajole him or Jaheira or Khalid, both of whom were more silent individuals, into speaking.

Shaking his head, he turned his attention back to his wife, smiling as she slowly started to undress, taking in her form as an artist would a magnificent painting. A stir of baser desire also flashed across his mind, but he quashed it, knowing now was not the time for such. *Perhaps if we stay a few nights in the Friendly Arm Inn.*

“But it is h, h, his various abilities that surprise me. He is when it is a, a, all said and done on, on, only a Level 5 Paladin. Yes, he sh, should be looking for the deity he wi, wishes to pledge himself too. Yet, h, h, his various strengths and abilities physically are fa, far higher than they, sh, sh, should be. His knowledge of co, co, combat isn’t, but his str, str, strength, his dexterity, both are much h, h, higher than they should be.”

He looked at his wife her confirmation that she had seen the same thing, and she nodded firmly. “The same is for Imoen if on a smaller scale from what I have seen when I have sparred with her. I have noticed her dexterity and agility are far higher than her level would suggest, even without her amusingly named passive skill of ‘Fight Like a Jackrabbit’. I would say from their stats and skills they are at least in the nine to eleven level range, perhaps a bit less?”

“Ex, ex, exactly! it makes me wonder how they ha, ha, have been trained before this. After all, Gorion is n, n, not one to concentrate so m, mu, much on one area.”

“Gorion concentrate on only the physical side of things?” Jaheira scoffed at the very idea, and the two of them exchanged a brief chuckle before lapsing into companionable silence as they thought about their old friend. Though human, Gorion had been one of their closer companions for more than thirty years before he had retired to Candlekeep, and both of them had many fond memories of him, from when he was a young man straight to when he had become an experienced and dangerous Adventurer.

“It makes me wonder how they have been able to build up their physical abilities to such an extent,” Jaheira said breaking the silence by reiterating the question they had been wondering about before. Of course both half-elves knew of ways to build up strength and dexterity, but such means were of limited return after a short period of time.

“So either Imoen and Harry has discovered new ways that the two of us don’t know about to heighten their physical abilities, or something else is going on. And it makes one wonder furiously to think about their parentage in particular,” Jaheira mused, to which her husband simply nodded, sharing a dark glance with her.

After a moment she went on, putting both their thoughts into words as was her wont. “And then of course there is their item boxes, and a few other minor things I notice about the two of them. Mysteries that are adding up to something. I am not doubting that they are good youths you understand my husband, it is just odd, that is all.”

Khalid nodded. “A m, my, mystery to be ce, ce, certain. Yet perhaps one they wi, wi, will enlighten us upon as we continue to get to k, k, know one another.”

Jaheira nodded, and the two of them turned in for the night, curling up against one another under their shared blankets.

The next night, they finally came out of the woodlands into the more settled area around the Friendly Arm Inn.

The change between forest and settled area was quite abrupt.  One moment they were moving through trees whose ages could be best told in millennia and then they were among scrub brush and scattered fields, an actual road, or rather two roads, for the first time since their journey had begun. One was running parallel to their route to one side just a bit further away than bowshot, showing the two youngsters that Jaheira had led them perfectly through the woods.

Visible in the distance further ahead of them to the east, there was a main road, its stone cobbles rattling with the loud noise of several carts moving along it. Harry and Imoen also saw the blue dots of several dozen people scattered across the fields and onto that road at the furthest reaches of their map.

To one side of that road in the distance, beyond the range of their maps, they could see a large stone building surrounded by four smaller buildings, each of them set within 20 yards or so of of the stone outer wall of the large mansion within. None of the outer buildings were made of stone, instead being made of thatch and wood, but they too had smaller hedge walls around them. Around this center they saw numerous guards along with farmers and travelers traveling along the road.

None of the famers closer to them even looked at them askance coming overland and they moved to join up with the road that would have led from Candlekeep to here, before it intersected the wider road. This was the road to the south and north, the South Beregost Road.

To Harry and Imoen’s surprise, Khalid and Jaheira pulled up their hoods as they moved forward, making themselves look as nondescript as they could. The cloaks hid their armor, but left Jaheira’s Druid staff and Khalid’s bow and quiver to be seen. They looked almost like villagers, or perhaps hunters rather than Adventurers now.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked quickly, looking around them.

“It is better to get the lay of the land before announcing your presence, child, much like you said we might need to later on, so we do here,” Jaheira said shaking her head. “We have friends at the Friendly Arm Inn, and yet it is civilization, an important crossroads, which allows for the presence of enemies at the same time.”

Harry and Jaheira shrugged, before pulling up their own hoods way. “We do kind of stand-out don’t we,” Harry said gesturing towards Imoen’s hair and his own lightning bolt scar.

“In a word yes,” Jaheira said dryly, shaking her head as she stared at his hair. “Honestly, what were you thinking child, pink?”

“I like pink!” Imoen shot back shaking her head. “It doesn’t seem to bother my hide in shadows ability at all, so while I can’t exactly blend into a crowd, I can hide myself just fine.”

“Those are two very different things and blending in is often even more advantageous in non-combat settings,” Jaheira remonstrated, and the two of them were off again while Harry and Khalid shook their heads.

Moments later they had reached the crossroad. They were about to turn to make their way a bit north to head to the inn, but they were halted by two other fellows, coming down the main road.

The two were an odd pair to be sure. One was a halfling man, dressed in decent chain armor, wielding a long dagger and a small shield, with several long, thin scars marking his face. The one who addressed them was a tall human man with wavy hair down to just below his ears whose face looked as if it had been marked by someone wanting to make him look like a demented jester without the white makeup. He had a series of eight dots on his forehead right above his eyes, cry lines under his eyes, and then what looked like thin smile lines moved from his mouth in either direction.

“Ah, two young people travelling these roads alone. You must either be most puissant, or idiotic to do so. I wonder which it is. Still, the answer to such a question must be found by asking the person in question. Ho my Good fellows,” the human man shouted in a louder voice, as if his earlier words hadn’t been audible. “From where do you come? And have you news of the road?”

Harry looked at the two people who had moved into their way, taking in their appearance slowly while his Gamer ability gave him what information.

**Name**: Xzar

**Gender**: Male

**Class**: level 35 Necromancer.

**Relationship Status**: unfriendly, -500/1000 respect, -1000/1000 trust (yes there are negative numbers). This individual does not like you, or indeed many other people. It’s nothing personal, Xzar simply has a very twisted view of the world and the people within it beyond himself.

The information gained from the other fellow was much the same, although he was a 24 dual level Fighter and thief, with a level 24 in Thief and 16 in Fighter. His relationship was also Toxic. “Nothing you do or say will change the opinion of this fellow that you, like nearly every individual in the world not named Mortarion, is better dead than alive. Don’t let your children grow up to by gleeful psycho killers, boys and girls.”

For a moment, Harry thought that Jaheira or Khalid would speak up, but the two of them had suddenly fallen behind Harry and Imoen. Indeed, they were so far away by now they weren’t even in speaking distance, leaving the two of them to talk to these two fellows as if the two half-elves had never been part of the same party.

Harry blinked at that but took it in stride as much is he could, moving forward himself and nodding. *I don’t like their relationship status, but I am not going to start something here unless they do the same.* “I’m afraid that we don’t actually have much information from the south. We came from Candlekeep way.”

“Indeed, and how is the ancient repository of what other people seem to think it’s important? Still drear, boring, and self-important, full of people nearly as dry and flammable as their books?” asked the mage, chuckling at his own humor. “Honestly, how does that place still exist despite the fact that it has the most ridiculous method of gathering knowledge that I have ever heard of.”

“Somewhat, but I’ll agree it was rather boring and dry there? As for why we are traveling I could say that we are on a search to find ourselves, Harry said with a shrug. “I am a paladin, and I need to figure out what denomination to follow. Candlekeep didn’t have any churches or sects there for me to study at. My friend Imoen has come with me for the adventure of the road.”

“Ick, a paladin, guh, I hate good-doing lickspittles like that. What say we kill him, and then have some fun with the girl. I’ll wager I’ll be much more fun than the boy who’d rather spend the night praying than plowing girl,” the assassin quipped, leering at Imoen.

She huffed, but didn’t look away, crossing her arms under her chest and cocking her hips at the halfling. “Don’t get any ideas Short and Stabby. I like my man a good deal taller than you,” she said, while also indicating something else entirely by pulling two fingers away from one another in a parallel, stopping, after a glance at the dwarf, with her fingers barely two inches away.

“I’ll have you know, that I am most disproportionate to my size my dear, and I like stabbing things. Don’t make fun of my pastimes less you find yourself it’s recipient.” Mortarion retorted with a cackle, causing Imoen to roll her eyes.

“Pray then keep it and your daggers in your pants. I don’t want to see you using either of them.”

“If we could get back on track,” Xzar said coldly to her and his companion before trying to smile naturally at Harry, the expression more of a rictus on his face than anything else. “You wouldn’t have happened to hear aught about the activities of any bandits in the area would you?”

Harry and Imoen both shook their heads, and the man sighed. “Ah, so you are both deaf and dumb. Excellent, those are both things I look for in companions. For, there is strength in numbers. If you have not pressing business to the north of here, could we interest you in joining with us. The two of you may see young at first glance, yet experience is the best teacher, and we have need for meat shields. that is companions, on this journey.”

“To that I would ask you the same question you put to us,” Harry said with a smile as he fought to keep from either rolling his eyes or killing this psycho where he stood. “Why are you journeying?”

The two unknowns exchanged a glance, and Xzar went on a little more slowly. “We have business in the South. The issue of the iron shortage has been noticed in the great city to the north, and the two of us, among others less intelligent and more expendable to be sure, have been sent South. Yet it seems to me, that it will take someone of my vast, overpowering intellect to discover what is going on.”

Mortarion seemed to dispute that, snorting and spitting to one side while Imoen rolled her eyes at the man’s ego.

“But whatever is causing it, we must take part of it, err, take it apart. The iron shortage issue is causing far too many problems in far too many quarters, there are lines that have been crossed, which we cannot allow. If it was directed, controlled and allowed to bear only certain fruit, perhaps there could be some purpose to it, yet at the moment, that is most decidedly not the case.” Xzar went on.

“You’re saying that you’re not going to try to solve the issue?”

“Oh,” Xzar said with a wave of his hand. “Perhaps, perhaps if that serves our purposes, and if there is not a certain amount of profit to be made.”

“Profit?” Harry asked incredulously. “From the iron shortage, with war threatening over the horizon?”

“You sound astonished at the notion, ah, but you are a paladin-in-training. I apologize, I’ll speak slower so you someone of your limited intellect and naïve world view can understand.”

“I understand it,” Harry said hurriedly. “I’m just wondering how exactly you would be able to take over something that has obviously been going on for some time and has already built up to this level. Just the two of you?”

“I, then you’re much wiser than I expected a paladin to be. Yes, I understand your concerns. But never fear, my friend Mortarion and I are quite capable. Quite… capable,” he repeated, his lips twisting into a sneer, as magical energies began to accumulate around each hand.

Harry slowly nodded at that, and the halfling suddenly barked out “Well, what about it. Are you willing to join us? We cannot promise that you would be able to find a a temple to pray to along the way, though why’d you want to do that when there’s killing and wenching to do, but you might find experience, answers, and perhaps, in a bit to knowledge about the world.”

A pop-up window once again appeared in Harry’s vision.

You have been offered the chance to join forces with the most unlikely and somewhat confusing pair of Xzar and Mortimer. Warning, while the idea the idea of additional party members is always good, adding new partners is always a chancy business. Especially with obviously crazy people. Yet crazy money spends as well as sane:

If you chose to add these two to your party, the quest ‘Xzar and Mortarion’ will become active. Rewards include 3000 XP, greater relations with Xzar (not Mortarion, he’s just crazy that way) and their mysterious backers.

Harry idly wondered who these two represented. It was evident that Mortarion at least had been speaking not only of themselves but of a larger group. *And it might be just an impression, but the way they speak, it’s more like they are affronted at the very idea of the iron shortage happening without their being a part of it than worry about the fact that it is happening at all.* Harry didn’t know what to make of that. He also could tell they were both a very long way from sane, and in fact were possibly just plain crazy. *I don’t think anything good can come from being around these two for an extended period of time.*

Still, Harry decided to be diplomatic for now. “I’m sorry, but I have to decline. For one thing, I wouldn’t want to hold you up, as we do have business at the Friendly Arm Inn, that could take us several days to complete. For another, I truly do wish to first find a god to follow, before deciding upon my path afterwards. But, the iron shortage issue does interest me and perhaps down the road, when my journey takes me South, we can work together then.”

“You speak like a burgher and yet you speak with a certain amount of decorum to your betters,” conceded Xzar overriding the halfling’s response, which was unprintable. “Still, our offer is not one made more than twice young ones. Be aware of that the next time we meet.”

“And if that happy day at comes, we will see you then. Good day.” Harry replied.

With that, the odd pair passed Harry and Imoen, with Mortarion sneering at them both, drawing a thumb across his neck as he passed them. As they passed where Khalid and Jaheira were ostensibly reading the side and speaking quietly to a farmer while helping him with his cart which had busted an axle very conveniently they both slowed down slightly, so slightly Harry didn’t notice but Imoen, a master of body language, did.

Harry was still confused about the two Harper’s odd actions. They waited until the two crazies were out of sight before moving over to Imoen and Harry, who asked the two of them, “What was all that about?”

“It was better that you handle speaking to those two, child,” Jaheira said with a shake of her head. “Do you know what they were?”

“You mean beyond insane?” Harry asked, frowning as he cocked his head at her. “A mage and a thief, I think, why?”

“I was not asking for their Adventurer class,” she said dryly shaking her head. “I was asking about their affiliation.”

While Harry was still looking confused, Imoen was looking at the two Harpers, crossing her arms. “Do you want to set share something with the class?”

“We co, could smell those two, a m, m, mile away,” Khalid said, his voice quite a bit colder than either of the two humans had ever heard before. “Do you kn, kn, know about the Xhentarim?”

Harry slowly nodded, turning to look down the road towards where Xzar and Mortimer had been going. “They’re a group like the Harpers, only directly opposed to you, they serve their own ends or evil I believe.

“Correct,” Jaheira said coldly. “They are the sworn enemies of the Harpers, and we have had run-ins with various members of that group before. Those two were unknown to us, but the signs and the feeling is there for those who have the ability to see. That, and yes, they were both obviously insane,” Jaheira added dryly.

“Why were you so friendly to them?” she asked abruptly almost glaring at Harry as she crossed her arms and stared angrily at him.

Harry shrugged. “I could tell they were kind of crazy too you know,” he said, scratching at his lightning bolt scar, even as he looked at the blonde half-elf in amusement. “And while I didn’t know they worked for the group you spoke of I could tell they were part of a larger organization. I therefore didn’t see any reason to be anything but friendly. It was a false friendliness, but I doubt they care, and besides, it serves no one for us to have to dodge assassins from another quarter or have another group of spies starting our path that we will already have the deal with.

Jaheira called down somewhat at that, nodding her head slowly. “I had hoped it was something like that and not you trying to keep your options open for more spurious reasons,” she confessed.

As Jaheira spoke, a message appeared in Harry’s vision denoting that he had won 300 Trust and 80 Respect from Jaheira and the by-now normal double that amount with her husband. That meant he was more than halfway to becoming an actual friend or whatever the next level up from traveling companions/acquaintances was with Khalid (the Trust aspect being full now), and still way less than that with Jaheira.

“You speak wisdom for one so young,” Jaheira went on, of course not seeing the message Harry had. “Pray keep it up.”

Harry chuckled rather wanly at that, reminded of his secret, about how old he was back in his original body, whatever his new body might tell anyone. To one side, Imoen giggled wildly into her hand thinking about the same thing, actually having to put her hand over her mouth for a moment.

Blinking at the odd response to her statement, Jaheira shook her head, and gestured the three of them to move along. “Come, the Friendly Arm Inn beckons.”

The four of party members moved to join the small queue looking to enter the inn via a small side road connecting it to the main road heading north and south. There was an even dozen men and women in line there with packs or carts waiting there. Still, the guards inside moved through it quickly, with the biggest wait occurring with the one cart directly ahead of them. By the time it was their turn the previous fellows had moved off, leaving the entrance deserted on the other end as well as behind them.

“Number of rooms needed and the duration of your stay,” said a guard with a clipboard, looking up at them. “No names needed, just the number of rooms an’ the duration,” he intoned by rote, sounding extremely bored.

Above his head, Harry read, “Friendly Arm Guard, level 14. A neutral non-Adventurer (any relationship beyond simple acquaintance is impossible) who is assigned to the thankless task of saying hello to people like you.” That told him nothing about how tough an opponent the guy might be, since Guard, certainly hadn’t been an Adventurer class. *Still, it’s not like I’m going to try and start trouble here.*

“Four of us, probably one, maybe two nights at most,” Jaheira said crisply, “and two rooms. Or one if you do not have two.”

“We have room, although they’re not the least expensive,” the guard said shrugging his shoulders. “Nor the most expensive. We’ve got a lot of people here tonight, and a a caravan going in either direction came in last night, and the one going south has yet to leave, wanting to add more people to it. Safety in numbers you understand.”

Harry nodded at that, hearing the same phrase that Xzar had used moments ago.

“In case you haven’t been here before,” the man said, his voice shifting back into the dull rote response tone that he had been using earlier. “The rules of the Friendly Arm Inn at are as follows: No cheating at dice, if you are caught, we not only will evict you, we will remove one of your hands. No armed fighting outside the training pits. You draw steel we draw blood. You can practice and spar in the training pit if you must, but your blunted weapons will be inspected. You keep your room clean. There is to be no use of magic whatsoever within the room’s confines other than memorizing spells. Rowdiness is allowed in the tap room, so long as steel is not drawn but not the courtyard or the upper levels.”

“Payment is to be prompt, produced upon entrance into the inn proper at the the innkeeper’s desk. Any attempt to get out of that or finagle, and we will toss you out. The prices are what they are, there is no haggling allowed, but if you conduct business with anyone else, that’s up to them. We have a temple here to the Gnomish god Garl Glittergold, and the normal rules of such a temple apply on top of the rules we’ve already mentioned. If you cannot abide by these rules, seek rooms elsewhere.” The guard finished with a sneer, the face of a man who knew his Inn was the only one for miles in any direction.

Harry nodded, and replied for the group that they were all fine with that, when Jaheira looked at him questioningly at as if asking if he and Imoen could pay their own way.

“Is there someone on staff who would be interested in buying some jewels?” Harry asked instead of replying to her query.

The man nodded and gave the name of one of the workers inside the inn who handled such transactions but warned him that he would have to pay for his night before being allowed into the barroom proper where the was working. “You can pay for your second night after your first, but you have to pay to enter,” the guard intoned as if it was a religious law rather than simply a rule of the inn.

Harry nodded, and the four of them were finally allowed through the main portcullis into the courtyard of the large manor that had been converted into the Friendly Arm Inn.

The manor itself was about four stories taller than the outer wall which itself was three stories, a large building that was several times larger than the inn back at the entrance to Candlekeep, although it would have been dwarfed by the actual keep. Like Candlekeep, the manor was entirely built of stone and tiles, with the manor built up on stone pillars, allowing the ground floor to be used as a paddock. for horses. There were two small farms inside the outer wall visible from the entrance, one with several cows, the other with a good number of stumpy trees. From the portcullis they could see places where the courtyard was dotted by tents, put up next to carts.

As they moved into the courtyard Harry was taking it all in, but while he noticed the guards, he didn’t notice how tense they were. Imoen did. She might have only been an Auror trainee, but she had learned the one, universal rule of guards and police everywhere: guarding like this was the most boring occupation of all time. It took minds perfectly capable of staring at the same stretch of woodland for hours on end without dying up and going home. At night, the guards should be the next best thing to bored.

Instead, all the guards were tense, wary. They kept their eyes peeled to the world beyond the walls, and moved in groups of three, with the majority of them on the guardhouse’s roof above the portcullis. None seemed to be looking away from the outside, and she frowned, shaking her head and wondering why they were tense, but kept silent about it for now, moving after the others as they made their way through the darkened courtyard to the side of the manor where there was a staircase leading up to the inn’s main room.

As they came around the corner, Imoen and the others saw a smaller building set to one side. It had two wings spreading out straight from either side of a central dome, with the roofs of the wings being curved too. Along the front of the church was a row of roses, the red of them visible in the light of two braziers set to either side of the doorway and from within could be heard small chime. In front of the church were several dozen more tents and people could be seen sitting around small fires here and there.

However, Imoen and Harry ignored all that for what their area maps were telling them. At the top of the stairs were the silhouettes of two people, one of them leaning over the side of the railing, looking as if he was about to puke, with the other one standing beside him, shaking his head. It looked as if someone had simply drunk too much and was paying for it while his friend looked on, but there were a few bits that didn’t quite fit. First, these two were Adventurers, their levels, a Fighter level 14 and a Mage Level 22, by the names of Skitter and Tarnesh respectively.

But, although only Harry realized it, Tarnesh wasn’t drunk. If he was, that information should have been shown in a status bar under his name. Harry had seen such things before back in Candlekeep. Drunkenness, confusion, even poison (someone hadn’t cooked a fish properly), all of them showed up in a special status bar on the short information shown by looking at a person’s name. Here there wasn’t any of that.

But Khalid and Jaheira didn’t seem to notice anything, and the four of them made their way up the stairs. However, as Harry move up the steps into the light of a torch set at the corner of the manor, the man who had been calmly standing beside his friend looked at him straightened abruptly, smirking suddenly. “Ho friends, what brings you to the Friendly Arm Inn this night?”

Jaheira opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, the man attacked, a sword appearing almost as if from an item box in his hand as he lunged forward. The attack was so sudden, that Jaheira barely got her staff up in time to block it and could do nothing but stumble back down the stairs. “Nature’s fury, what…”

At the same time the man puking at the railing came alive, twisting around to face them. As he did he finished the words of a spell he had already started triumphantly thrusting out his hands towards Harry and his companions, who were all now pulling out weapons roused by the sudden attack on Jaheira. “Magical Thrust!”

The group of four found themselves blown off of the staircase, all four of them landing in a tumble on the ground below, with Jaheira rolling with the impact, and Khalid tumbling, but pushing himself to his feet and pulling out his sword and shield quickly as the shock of the sudden assault left him. Imoen too rolled coming to her feet and then in a smooth move even Harry hadn’t seen her do she stepped to the dark of one side

Harry didn’t take the fall nearly as well as the other three, but he had already pulled out his sword, and retained it in his hand. He didn’t bother summoning his shield just yet, instead concentrating on what his map was telling him for a brief second, seeing several blue icons showing other people had suddenly turned red. None of them were among the guards, but two of them were among the stable hands, and four others were among the people who had been lounging around a few of the tents behind them.

Two of those strung arrows to their bows and fired in the next instant. The attack would have struck an unsuspecting Khalid in the back if not for Harry shouting “Duck!” With that he took the man in a tackle and hurled them both to the ground. The arrows whizzed by overhead, causing Khalid to stare at them, then at Harry as he wondered how the boy had seen them coming, but not questioning it just then.

“We’re surrounded!” Harry shouted, “Imoen, take out that mage! Jaheira, tangling vines on that group of enemies over there, Khalid guard our back.” With that and ignoring Jaheira’s shout of irritation at his ordering them about, Harry leaped up and charged forward towards the first opponent that had tried to to attack Skitter, believing it more likely that he was of a higher level than the others, since it seemed as if everyone else was following his lead.

The man was fast, far faster than Harry had thought, his sword flashing forward, but Harry had been training with Khalid who was an even higher level Fighter, and he blocked the blow, much to his enemy’s surprise. Skitter was caught with his sword arm overextended, and Harry tried to take him in the side, thrusting hard for the man’s side. But Skitter somehow got his shield around and in the way of Harry’s blade, sending it to one side. Then they were trading blows, and Harry was slowly pushed back.

Growling, Jaheira realized that Harry’s call had been correct as she stared at the four men racing forward towards them from the tents. Smashing her staff into the ground she activated one of the spells set within it, and vines grew at the point of impact, flashing towards the four attackers, all of whom would, had Harry time to notice, be showing up in his view as Bandits, one of the many types of non-Adventurer combatants out there. She caught three of them, and with a shout Khalid moved past her to engage the first man sword to sword for a brief instance before his skill overcame the attacker, slicing deeply into his side.

That left the two archers and one other, a man who revealed himself to also be a mage, though like with the others Harry hadn’t seen it, not having looked directly at them since the battle began. Now both that mage and the one up on the balcony intend the same spell. Magic Missiles, a low level but quick casting spell flashed from their hands, tiny bolts of pure magical energy that hit like tiny hammers. The number of them varied based on the level of the caster, starting at three and adding an extra missile per two levels. Four flashed from the man on the ground, and 12 from the man above them.

One man had targeted Harry’s back, the other as Khalid engaged his fellow. Harry twisted, around just enough to take most of the missiles sent his way on his shield, only one of them getting through to slam into his thigh with punishing force, although his shield cracked in places, and Harry’s Gamer ability warned “Warning, your shield’s durability has fallen to 2/100. It can barely stop a breeze now let alone a blow.”

Between one second and the next, Harry had tossed the shield at Skitter, forcing the other warrior to back away. Then he was holding another tower shield pulling it from his Item Box. For a moment Skitter just gaped, as did the mage above them. “You can’t do that! Even an Item Box doesn’t work like that.”

“Well, I just did,” Harry quipped, charging forward, smashing his sword into Skitter’s then going shield to shield and pushing the other man back. As he did so another message showed up, visible only to him.

You have attempted Shield Bash! Warning, Shield Bash is a Warrior skill that must be learned prior to use. Your attempt has failed but has opened up the ability to learn the move in the future.

However, while the two original attackers were being at least put on the backfoot by the two from Candlekeep, behind them Khalid, with his sword stuck in his opponent’s chest, wasn’t able to twist his body around to bring his shield up in time to stop the Magic Missiles coming his way. The blows from the Magic Missiles caught him off balance and smashed him off of feet once more.

He landed at Jaheira’s feet groaning, while her spell tangled vines hadn’t done nearly as much as Harry had hoped to slow the advance of the for coming up at them from behind. She too gave a cry as an arrow found her in the shoulder, causing her to drop her Druid staff even as she healed herself with her free hand, grabbing at her waist and the cudgel there.

Harry cursed, then looked on up with a smile as Tarnesh, the mage above them, screamed as Imoen suddenly appeared in the darkness beneath the stairway, stabbing up between two of the slats and into his foot. He stumbled to his knees, holding his ruined foot, and whimpering.

But unfortunately for them all he had enough presence of mine to toss himself back onto the balcony, away from Imoen. And the balcony, unlike the steps, was solid wood, without any slits to stab through. Grimacing, Imoen dropped down to the ground, disappearing into shadows again. *Huh, I think I’m getting the hang of this whole hit and run thing the Thief class has going for it.*

At the same time she had dropped to the floor, Harry had twisted around. “Jaheira, catch!” tossing his shield to Jaheira, who quickly used it to defend herself, even as she strained somewhat to lift it. Jaheira block the few blows from her opponents with Harry’s shield, as she fumbled at her belt for her club, and the first attacker to reach them through her tangling vines fell screaming as her husband stabbed up at them, regaining his feet but slowly until Jaheira turned her healing on him.

But that moment of largess cost Harry. Before he could pull out his last spare shield, Skitter’s blade caught his, and though Harry’s sword turned his enemy’s blade, the sword shattered, and he cursed, before wheeling away from that opponent, hurling the remains of his ruined sword into the man’s face, as another message appeared.

Your weapon has been destroyed, -10 to attack. Your weapons destruction has injured your hand, laceration damage to palm and the back of your wrist.

Despite that pain, Harry reached into his item box and pulled out his Warhammer, bringing it around in a powerful two-handed blow into the side of Skitter, who had flinched back from the hilt to the face. He let loose a scream as his ribs cracked and was hurled to the side.

With the one mage nursing a badly wounded foot, Harry saw that Jaheira quickly moved to engage the others. Khalid had blocked two more arrows and another magic missile spell, but this had allowed the last two bandits around him to attack Jaheira, who had taken another arrow to the side. her armor had blocked the arrow, but barely.

Another spell lashed out, a confusion spell that swept over them all. This caused both Khalid and Jaheira to lower their defenses for a second, while Harry dropped his hammer to land in the dirt at his feet. If they had time, their Willpower would come into play to throw the spell off, but the last two attackers who had charged forward were free of Jaheira’s tangling vines and advancing. One of them even activated his own Hide in Shadows as he came.

But then Harry was on the last one visible smashing into one him bodily, taking the bandit to the ground. Once down, Harry slammed a punch into his face that nearly splattered his brains all over the place a show of strength that took Jaheira aback for a moment as she threw off the last bit of confusion.

Then the man who had disappeared earlier into shadows came out from behind Harry, and his sword was out and flashing before she could even shout a warning.

But Imoen was suddenly there, coming out of her own Hides in Shadows technique, grabbing at the man’s wrist with one hand, as her sword flashed up. The man parried it with a dagger but was not prepared for a red glow that suddenly appeared around Imoen’s hand, causing him to slump, while Jaheira blinked wondering what she had just seen. The next instant, that man died, as Khalid’s blade found him, stabbing him hard the side.

This left Jaheira to take out the mage and the two archers. Fully recovered from her Confusion she did so in no uncertain terms. With a roar she started her own chant, and the spell lashed out not into her opponent but up into the nighttime sky.

Jaheira has used Call Lightning. This bolt of lightning flashes down in a vertical stroke at any of the priest or druid’s enemies. The first enemy struck by the lightning will be the enemy targeted, but after that the lightning will spread out to any nearby enemy, creating a small, but localized lightning storm. No Allies will be harmed by this show of Nature’s Fury.

The message appeared to Harry and Imoen’s eyes before a lightning strike flashed down, electrifying the low level mage and his two archer allies. All three of them screamed and died, writhing on the ground while at last the guards on the walls noticed something was going on.

*About damn time!* Harry grumbled, hearing the shouts in the distance over a strange humming noise in the background. It was with some trepidation that Harry turned in the direction of the noise to see Tarnesh standing once more on his ruined foot on the balcony above them.

In their rush to finish the other attackers, Harry and his party had neglected to finish off the first two, especially Tarnesh, the mage that Imoen had stabbed earlier. Skitter had healed himself somewhat with a potion and taken position again on the steps guarding his companion. The mage was the worse threat though, having had time to chant another powerful spell. “Fireball!” he shouted, thrusting his hand down towards them. A ball of flame twice as large as a basketball flashed out towards them.

Tarnesh has used Fireball. The Quintessential magical spell, this favorite of all wand-wavers everywhere creates a large fireball that detonates upon impact with the ground, expanding into an explosive cloud that burns everything in its path, while also blowing those of shorter stature or weight off their feet. The damage, duration and power of the spell, like most spells, is directly connected to the level of the mage.

But even as the spell flashed towards them, Imoen and Harry were already moving. Imoen was closer to Khalid at the moment, and took him at a run, taking him off his feet and placing her own body over his. At the same time Harry grabbed Jaheira, pulling her around, and taking possession of his shield again holding in between the two of them and the incoming spell.

Of course, the two half-elves didn’t know this, and for a moment, Jaheira wondered if Harry had lost his mind. A regular shield would be no match for a fireball spell, and she wondered if all of three of them were about to die. Injured multiple times since the battle began and having not had time to heal herself back up to full health, Jaheira knew she and Khalid at least lacked the health to survive a fireball from a high level mage, which Tarnesh must be given the number of Magic Missiles he had conjured earlier.

But then twin bright glows enveloped Harry and Imoen just as the explosion hit, and Jaheira gasped as the fire of the fireball spell and the slight impetus that it would’ve given them washed over and away from the two of them, leaving Harry and Jaheira, and Khalid and Imoen not only not burning, but not even injured.

The blue faded quickly, and Harry rushed forward, hoping to get to the stairwell and up towards the mage.

However, Tarnesh recovered from his own surprise quickly, and lashed out once more with the old mage stand by. Once more Magic Missiles flew, targeting Harry. Harry grunted as his shield once again shattered under the impacts, followed quickly by three of them slamming into his chest, and his health bar decreasing deep into the red and Skitter, moved forward to finish him off, his blade raised high over his hand in a two handed grip, his face a rictus of agony from his ribs,.

But then, Khalid was back in the fight, pulling up his bow and arrow and loosing it into the throat of Skitter. He fell with a bloodcurdling scream, losing his sword to grasp at his neck and Harry leaped over his body, bringing around his hammer in a two-handed swing. The mage’s head splattered everywhere, gore flying back into Harry’s face and upper body, as his body collapsed to the side.

Harry breathed heavily, staring around him, as guards from the wall and main entrance to the courtyard **finally** rushed towards them. Thankfully several bystanders had seen the whole thing from the shadows and started shouting out what had been happening to the guards as they rushed forward. That meant none of the guards in turn turned red for enemy on his map as they moved forward.

One moved through the carnage quickly, nodding gruffly to Harry and the others as he apologized for what had happened. “This shit’s not supposed to happen in the Friendly Arm Inn,” he said, as Harry stared down at the body of the man he’d just killed, the fifth such man he’d killed so far.

To his credit, Harry was a little worried about that aspect despite his Gamer’s Mind keeping him from falling into a funk about it. Looking up he simply nodded to the guard, gesturing around them. “I take it, that means we can search their bodies for clues as to the why of this attack?”

“Yeah, because me and Harry here’ve never been away from Candlekeep before, and I doubt this could have been a crime of passion towards my companions,” Imoen quipped as she knelt, cleaning her short sword on the nearest dead body. Luckily the magic of the fireball spell was what sustained it’s flames, and the fires it had begun quickly puttered out.

“Indeed not,” Jaheira muttered, while Imoen moved to help her sit Khalid up from where he had fallen onto his side after shooting the arrow that had taken out Skitter. Like Imoen, he was a little battered around the edges, especially his head, Imoen not having had time to be gentle when she tackled him to the ground. And alas, Jaheira knew Khalid often was effected more by Confusion spells since the miscast spell that had given him his stutter.

While the two ladies were seeing to their wounded companion, Harry dealt with the guards, who started to clean up the bodies after Harry searched them. He didn’t find much of interest until he got back to Skitter’s body, finding on him a message that explained this attack.

BOUNTY NOTICE: Be it known to all those of evil intent, that a bounty has been placed upon the head of Harry, the foster child of Gorion. Last seen in the area of Candlekeep, this person is to be killed in quick order. He can be identified by the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. He might be in company of a pink haired girl of short stature but still human descent. Those returning with proof of the deed shall receive no less than 200 coins of gold for his head. A further hundred shall be yours for the confirmed death of the girl, but none for her alone. As always, any that reveal these plans to the forces of law shall join the target in their fate.

As Harry read that message, a quest bar appeared in his view.

“**Someone Out There Hates You**: It looks as if the armored giant is no longer willing to get his own hands dirty and has gifted you with a bounty. This might turn the hands of all those evil or criminal in this land against you, until, that is, they realize taking you might be costing them more than gold. Kill forty assassins and you might make the rest of the underworld think twice about tangling with you. Just don’t let innocents get caught in the crossfire. This is a mandatory quest that can be achieved over time for a reward of 2000 XP and Reputation +1.”

You have Survived an Assassination attack: XP reward of 500 plus the XP for each attacker: Tarnesh, 800 experience, Skitter, 400, Bandit X 6 at 70 experience each, Bandit Mage X1 at a hundred.

An instant later, these two messages were superseded by another one that Harry had been hoping to see for a while now. “Congratulations, you have leveled up. Harry is now a level 6 Paladin.” It was all Harry could do to not thrust a hand in the air and shout in triumph.

Despite his jubilation however, Harry knew he couldn’t deal with that just yet. He had to deal with the locals, while Jaheira was too busy fussing, and there was no other term for it, over Khalid and Imoen, who looked a little sheepish but happy at the reaction from the standoffish Druid. It didn’t stop her from going “Aw, you really do care.”

For which she earned a smack upside the head and a “Oh, grow up child!” From the other woman.

Rolling his eyes, Harry put the bounty notice he’d read into his item box and continued to loot, waiting for the others instead of entering the inn now. *My party members folks, warts and all.* As he thought that, he realized he wouldn’t have it any other way.

He didn’t notice Jaheira’s speculative glance going between him and Imoen. *What in the world was that, that magical shield? No Paladin or Thief should be able to do that. So what was that? And the red glow Imoen showed earlier. Hmm… I think tonight Khalid and I must have a talk with these two. There is far more going on here than meets the eye.*

End Chapter

Ain’t named Rowling or Forgotten Realms, although that last name would be kickass.

**Chapter 4: You Meet All Sorts on the Road**

About five minutes after talking to the guards, another local came out, this time a gnome adventurer. He took one look at the guards around Harry and his party and their dead attackers, his eyes lighting on Khalid and Jaheira for a brief second longer than would have been normal. “Alright you idiots, I don’t pay you to stand around like chickens with their heads in the trough after an attack’s happened. I’ll get a few of the stable hands to take care of the bodies, get back on watch..”

Harry turned to the man, seeing the information pop up above his head, as he noticed that he read as an adventurer, but was the blue of noncombatant while the guards moved off with alacrity. And even more oddly, the information read like the information he had gotten about the guards rather than Xzar or Khalid, although thankfully he wasn’t the orange of a possible enemy, and such it gave Harry more information than he’d had from Skitter and his companion.

Bentley Mirrorshade, level 22 Warrior.

The owner of the Friendly Arm Inn, once a powerful adventurer, now a powerful innkeeper and landowner. He might have let his body go to seed a bit, but don’t let that fool you, this gnome could still probably give any low ranking adventurer a run for his money.

Harry could well believe it. The gnome seems to have a very tough looking body, just barely going to fat, but his level was more than ten levels below Jaheira and Khalid’s. *But on the other hand* Harry thought, *those two aren’t nearly as tough for their levels as I would’ve expected.* *Nor were those mages. What’s up with that?*

The whole idea of levels, and whether or not he and Imoen were normal or unusual was something they would have to figure out in the future*. It could be perhaps because of their Elvish heritage. They’re just not as tough physically as they should otherwise be while all their other abilities are at the correct level?*

When the last guard was out of earshot, Bentley turned to Jaheira and Khalid, thumping his stomach in amusement. “You two! It’s been how many years we’ve since I’ve seen you, and you’re still trailing trouble after you. Of course given your profession perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Perhaps, but perhaps not. Perhaps trouble is just there waiting for us when we arrive,” Jaheira said, holding out (and down) her hand to the gnomish man. “It is good to see you old friend.”

“And I you,” he said with a booming laugh, clasping first her hand and then Khalid’s in friendship. “How are you both doing? Did you ever find a cure for that…”

“W, we are w, well enough,” Khalid said shaking his head subtly as he interrupted Bentley’s question. “Well en, n, enough. Although I will say, I did no, no, not anticipate being att, tt, attacked like this in your inn my friend. Have you beg, g, begun to lose your touch in finding fight, fi, fighting men?”

Some dig was involved in that that Harry couldn’t follow, but which caused the man to cough exasperatedly, shaking his head. “Will you never let me live that down?”

That half-elf warrior shook his head with a laugh. “No. It, it’s too good.”

Jaheira frowned, shaking her head, the loose tufts of blonde hair to either side to move slightly, although much of it was matted with blood from the fight, it had been that close. “Again with that old joke. If you’re going to make jokes at Mirrorshade’s expense Khalid, the least you can do is let your wife in on the story behind them.”

“He promised he would never tell anyone else that story, so don’t blame him,” Bentley replied with swiftly, almost glaring at Khalid who just nodded his head. “So, who are your new companions? And how long are you staying for? And,” he went on in a lower tone. “What was this attack about. Do you require any help?”

The last was asked very hesitantly, and it was obvious to Harry and the others the man had no love of the idea of getting involved in what he obviously considered Harper troubles. Still the fact he was offering at all said something good about him.

Harry stood forward, holding out his hand. “My name is Harry sir, and that is Imoen over there. We are new adventurers out seeking the world away from Candlekeep, where I was a ward of Gorion.” He had instantly made a decision to not tell the man about why they had been attacked, instead saying that this seemed to be something because of his connection to Gorion. As he said that, a new notice appeared in his line of vision just above Bentley’s head.

“Spot check passed. Your charisma has allowed your thinly veiled lie to be believed by Bentley, just don’t get used to it.”

“That makes sense,” Gorion said with a nod. “Gorion made even more enemies than you two did after all, and not all of them came from Harper business either. He was much more active around the Sword Coast than the two of you were before his retirement to Candlekeep.”

“Indeed,” Jaheira said, going with the lie that Harry had come up with quickly shooting him an approving look before turning back to Bentley. “And the fact that we might be looking into another trouble around here also adds to that.”

“The Iron Intake Issue shortage,” the man said nodding slowly. “I can’t tell you much about it, I’ve not been away from the Friendly Arm Inn for more than twenty years as you all well know. What I can tell you though is that it is a **big** issue, it’s having an impact both economically and politically.”

There was a loud \*Bing\*, as his Gamer system conjured another notice in front of Harry.

The main quest, ‘Iron Intake Issue’, has been updated. You have realized the scope of the problem.

The iron shortage problem is much larger than you feared, and the importance of finding the reasons behind it have grown. Search for more clues and you might discover more about the final goal of the individuals behind the problem.

“But we already knew that,” Harry muttered to himself, shaking his head.

“I do, don’t believe we need that m, m, much in the way of aid old f, f, friend, although if you would l, l, let us stay for free…” Khalid trailed off leadingly.

“Of course, of course! Do you honestly think I’d let you pay after being attacked in my inn? You can stay for three days in the best rooms of that we have available. That’s a suite on the fourth floor, a small foyer and two small bedrooms. I’ll even throw in telling my wife to use her identify skill for you on any items you have for free. I’m not happy that you were attacked within my inn’s walls, to put it mildly,” Bentley said, a fierce scowl appearing on his face. “Will that do?”

“That will do nicely yes,” Harry said eagerly with a nod. “Thank you.”

“Might I ask that we also get free baths?” Imoen asked shaking her head as she looked down at her blood soaked leggings and blood splattered leather armor, which was really little more than a leather jerkin which offered a bare level of protection. “I’m feeling kind of dirty right now, and not the good kind.”

The gnome let out a laugh that was rather too loud to come from such a short fellow, shaking his head. “The Friendly Arm Inn offers warm baths for free, and hot meals for a penny a meal. It’s part of why were called the Friendly Arm Inn after all. Now come on, let’s get you started on those bathes.”

The four weary warriors entered the inn and found themselves in the main barroom instantly, where Bentley shouted at a young boy, who ran on ahead of them up the stairs with alacrity. The barroom was a high-ceilinged area, the main hall of the former baronial home the inn had been in ages past. The interior was lit by numerous lanterns here and there along with a few chandeliers with dozens of large candles each. About a dozen tables were scattered around the area filled to capacity, and two bars, one of at the far end, one on another wall, both of them also filled. Indeed, there were so many people that Harry could barely make out any of their names with his Gamer skill, and on the map the room was a giant sea of blue dots.

The whole area the area was just damn crowded, the noise of dozens of conversations bombarding their senses loudly from the get go. *Hmm…I don’t know if I’d be able to pick out a single orange dot among the blue like this, that’s something i to remember.*

It was so crowded and so noisy their entrance went unremarked, even the blood splattering them all was ignored as Bentley led the way around the outskirts of the hall and then to a series of stairs at the back. There he left them heading around the bar set to one side of the stairs where he disappeared underneath the bar for a second, coming back with a series of keys. He handed them to the four adventurers, telling them, “Room 403, take the stairs all the way up, then turn right, can’t miss it.”

Thanking him profusely, the blood-spattered group made their way up the inn, remaining quiet as they did. In the room, true to Bentley’s word, there were two tubs in each room already teeming with water. Imoen instantly went towards one, saying, “Girls over here, boys over there. And afterwards, I think we should all head downstairs and listen into the conversations going on. Bars like this, they’re going to have a lot of rumors, and if you listen to a lot of them, eventually you can put enough rumors together to get some truth. That way we can figure out if there’s anything new to learn about the iron shortage that the innkeeper doesn’t already know.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Harry said with a nod. “But while you all are doing that; I’ll take this ring I found on that mage’s body over to be identified and ask about other temples in the area since you two don’t know about any.”

Khalid nodded, smiling. “I can a, a, ask more questions from the innkeeper w, w, while we’re downstairs, in, in, information that can give us some idea of the s, s, scale of the iron ore t, t, trouble, how long it’s been going on, ho, ho, how far it has spread and such. Ben, ben, Bentley will also be able to point us to an, an, anyone who might have more in, in, information for us.”

For her part Jaheira looked around at the others and scowled a little internally. She had wanted to ask the two youngsters about their odd abilities and that spell they’d both used to defend the four of them from the fireball earlier, but evidentially, that wasn’t going to happen.

“**I** will talk to the proprietor,” she said warningly to Khalid as she pulled her armor over her head, dropping it to one side. She was amused to see that Harry had turned away from herself and Imoen as they began to under their armor, which in her case was a chain mail. *It wasn’t as if they didn’t have anything on underneath after all*. “You and the innkeeper would probably simply start to exchange stories and lose yourself in that and the wine rather than keeping on task.”

“You wo, wo, wound me,” Khalid said, although he did look a little guilty to Imoen’s eyes, as if the idea of losing himself to the wine wasn’t one he could argue against very well.

Later on, Imoen, out of her armor - such as it was - and into some leggings and a jerkin, smiled happily as she grabbed up a stein of ale from the bar, and began to move through the crowd, saying “excuse me,” “sorry about that miss”, and “hey love, ‘ware behind.”

As she did, she kept her ears open, looking around thoughtfully despite acting as if she was just wondering the crowd looking for a free seat. She spotted Harry instantly, moving through the crowd, looking uncomfortable as he made a beeline to the door. *Funny that I didn’t notice that when we were in Hogwarts. He* ***really*** *doesn’t do well with crowds does he?*

He moved through the crowd too, but unlike Imoen who moved through it like a fish through water, he parted the waves like a ship, his larger frame able to just move people out of the way. Yet as he did so, he bowed his head and acted self-conscious, trying to make himself small at the same time he was pushing through the crowd.

Shaking her head at that, Imoen moved through the crowd herself, heading towards the table that had just lost one of its members. “Hey all,” she said plopping into the empty chair. “You mind if I take up this chair for just the time it takes me to finish this drink?”

The other table goers, two dwarves, a human, and a gnomish woman mostly shrugged their shoulders, although the human man leaned across, smirking at Imoen. “That depends, how long does it take you to finish? Because my friend was sitting there moment ago.”

She shrugged. Then she downed half of her stein in one long gulp before slamming it down the table. Imoen had learned early on in this world that she could drink like a fish, which was good since she’d been able to do that in her last life too. “I don’t know you tell me,” she said cheekily.

The two dwarves smacked the table in approval, and the man scowled leaning back, conceding the point.

After that, Imoen introduced herself in as bubbly a manner as she could manage, which given her old life as Tonks was a hell of a lot, slapping on an actual question at the end. “So I’m Imoen, a would be adventurer out from Candlekeep with a friend, although we seem to have chosen a bad time to explore the world. What kind of dangers are out there for someone like me?”

“A lot,” the human man said, and Imoen looked up above his head for just a brief second, seeing that he was an Adventurer, a level nine Thief, which was interesting. The other two were farmers, who simply shrugged ignorance as the man went on. “Business is down all around. The sub-humans, the orcs, goblins, kobolds, and knolls are all making trouble throughout the Sword Coast, there had been a few reports of dire spiders and other monster type issues. Especially bandits along the road. Beyond that, well, if you want more info, ya might want to pay in return darlin’.” The look in his eyes as he gazed at Imoen told her precisely what kind of payment he wanted.

“Don’t speak to me about spiders!” shouted a voice nearby, obviously having overheard that comment through the background noise of the bar. “My home, my precious home!”

“Wow,” Imoen said, looking down at her drink. “And here I thought **I** needed this.”

With that, she stood up, and quickly moved over to the woman who had been sobbing, patting her back, and pouring her own drink into the woman’s. “There there, have a bit more drink, sorry I can’t offer more, unless you’re actually having issues?”

“Define having issues dearie,” the woman, whose name read as Landrin, a civilian said, drinking her drink eagerly, whining aloud, “My home, my lovely home…”

Seeing the woman was in no mood just yet to talk, Imoen moved on from there grinning at all around her and flirting it up, pulling drinks out of men’s hands and drinking half of them before pressing them back with a wink and sometimes a kiss on a cheek or a pat on the rear and moving on, her hips twitching this way and that. Yet whenever anyone got to fresh, she smacked away their hands with a laugh, gaining nods of approval from the barmaids working the crowd. You would’ve thought that a person with pink hair wouldn’t be able to fit into a crowd like this, but Imoen did it with an ease of long practice, her normal outgoing effervescent nature playing well here. But while she seemed to just be having fun, Imoen was listening all the time to the conversations all around her.

The first bit of information she heard that could deal with the ‘Iron Intake Issue’ (a name she still loathed, it didn’t even make sense!) which she overheard a few merchants saying that caravans were a new thing, but also didn’t seem to be working. “How the hell are they managing to bring together enough of brigands to truly stop a caravan!” shouted one man to another.

The gnome who had been shouted at growled back to the human doing the shouting, his own tone angry. “I don’t know, if I did do you think I’d still be sitting here waiting for my guilds okay to turn around back to Baldur’s Gate? But they are. The guards are charging more and more as they lose men and material.” He spat angrily to one side.   
Hah, it isn’t as if the iron is actually any good by the time it arrives in Baldur’s Gate anyway!”

They looked around as Imoen bumped into them, muttering an excuse me, before moving on, circling around that conversation slowly as she listened while the conversation had quickly turned back to the brigands. The iron shortage was indeed only half a problem. The rest of the rumors were about lots of bandits and undead and rest, having been on the rise in the area too. There was good money for adventurers on guard detail, and not many places safe from one type of danger or the other. The dangers from these bands of sub-sentients was way more, even for a place as untamed as the Sword Coast.

The Main Quest Iron Intake Issue has been updated. You have found new information.

For some reason, the iron issue is occurring at the same time that there has been a rise of bandit activity, both from human and nonhumans. How could these two troubles be related? How could they not be, given the timing? This information adds to your information pool and counts towards solving this quest.

How many clues can you discover in the Friendly Arm Inn, the meeting place of North, South, east and West?

There is a bonus available for finding them all!

“It’s tainted I tell you tainted at the source!” said another man, interjecting himself into the conversation.

He wasn’t the first one who mentioned something like that. More than one of the other drinkers said something similar about how they’d seen iron tools crack. A few had seen swords do the same, and more than half a table of hunters in from the woods said that even their steel arrowheads and daggers had started to show signs of failing. This eventually added up to another update.

The Main Quest Iron Intake Issue has been updated. You have found new information.

Something wrong with the iron itself? How can that be? You have heard numerous rumors about there being a problem not only with the shipment of iron, but with the quality of the iron when it arrives. Added to the fact that you have seen perfectly good-looking weapons break, this gives you new information that will count towards this quest.

There was even talk of some kind of a fortress being run by the knolls down South. But Imoen only heard one rumor about that, and it didn’t activate the quest log as the rest of the rumors had.

*Thank God this quest stuff carries over though*, Imoen thought, still smiling cheerfully as she turned away from one man, giving him a kiss on the cheek for the drink he’d offered her, but nothing more as she moved on leaving him with with a smile but nothing more. She paused mid-step though as she heard another \*Bing\*.

Flirty Little Lass: Imoen has used her body and wiles gain information that will serve the party in the future. +1 to Imoen’s Charisma. Add another two points to your charisma and the chance to confuse men will go up by ten percent.

“Bonus,” whispered to herself, then carrying on even more eagerly, though she kept from doing anything more than a wink and a kiss.

It quickly turned out that the Sword Coast was a source of raw goods for both Amn and Baldur’s Gate. Indeed, you could say that without the Sword Coast’s resources, Baldur’s Gate would not be the massive city-state that it was. Wood for the city itself and for its massive fleet, healing herbs, several types of exotic spices - the Sword Coast was famous for its spices - and all sorts of ore from precious metals to nickel and iron. All of it was able to be found here. But without iron, even other mining operations were slowing down.

“Indeed, there used to be a mining operation to the north west, a major one that should have been the start of a outposts town at the very least,” said one middle-aged man, shaking his head to a comment someone else had made about the iron issue only impacting adventurers, not noticing Imoen moving in close enough to overhear them halfway through. “But they couldn’t get mining equipment that could last at all in the past few months. If that kind of thing spreads, Baldur’s Gate won’t last, it’s power is built on trade after all.”

“I know the mine ya were talking about I think,. They were forced to abandon it about a month back. It’s a damn shame too, all of those attacks emptied the place out quickly, and I think that someone else has moved in,” said another man at the bar, leaning over Imoen to do it causing her to shift from her chair.

\*B-Bing\*. Imoen almost cheered aloud as she saw another two updates after that conversation before frowning slightly as she read them. The first was fine, but the second was downright annoying.

The Main Quest, Iron Intake Issue quest has been updated, you have found information.

You know now that the iron problem is effecting the whole economy of the region. All other mining operations have stopped, as far as the locals know. That could mean a disaster in the future for Baldur’s Gate.

Imoen has discovered a conversation that might lead to a quest. Unfortunately only the party leader can find and accept quests.

*Still look at the bright side Imoen old girl, if you see a notice like that, you know where to direct Harry after he comes back from the temple,* Imoen thought, keeping her spirits up. This was made easier a second later as her charisma went up another point do to her flirting. *Only one more. Although I wonder if I could use ‘Flirty Little Lass’ in combat?*

At the same time Imoen was working the crowd, the two Harpers had also gone to work. They had begun to speak quietly to Bentley and a few of the better dressed individuals. Imoen slowly drifted over, looking at them quizzically, and Jaheira whispered introductions into her ear which Imoen promptly forgot. Who cared if this or that individual was a magnate, whatever that meant, or a merchant prince, heck what did that even mean?

And yet, as she listened, she started to understand more. ‘Who has to gain’ was the main thrust of this discussion.

“Not the current power structure in Baldur’s Gate, or Amn. It’s true that our two nations, if Baldur’s Gate could even be called such are in a constant struggle, but it is an economic struggle, not a military one,” said the magnate, some guy from across the ocean, here on his way back to Baldur’s gate.

“Baldur’s Gate could call up whole armies of mercenaries with its treasures, and the city itself is near to impregnable. It’s mighty navy would make hash of any other nations maritime trade if they were so foolish as to go to war with it,” opined one man, smiling thinly at his fellows.

“Ah, but in contrast, Amn is very definitely its own superpower, with a massive military force, so wouldn’t need to pour out it’s life’s blood for a short term solution.” Said an Amnian, who despite his words was looking quite defensive, and also relieved that neither Jaheira or Khalid had a Baldur’s Gate accent, like most around the table. He went on in a more conciliatory tone. “But… they are a land-based force. Baldur’s Gate could hurt Amn severely with its navy and fighting along the Sword Coast would be horrible for both.”

“We are all agreed to that,” Jaheira said sharply. “You’re just basically listing reasons why whoever is stirring up trouble can’t be from one place or the other. But surely it **must** be someone in one of those areas yes? Who then?”

There were some looks between them, and the Gate natives spoke up. “…A noble perhaps, disillusionment yet with deep pockets, who wants to see himself rise and others fall. It would be an age old story, if written in different ink.”

“That metaphor didn’t work for me, sorry,” Imoen said with a shake of her head. “Could you explain that to this poor country girl?”

“He meant that a noble that nobles always scheme against one another, rising and falling, and if someone had, say in the last two generations taken in a major setback acting out in this manner might appeal to them. I think it’s a bit of a reach myself,” Jaheira said shaking her head even as she instructed the younger girl. “No, this must be the signs of something else, a criminal organization?”

“Than most definitely does not come from Amn,” the man from Amn said. “In my own business dealings I have had conflicts and issues with the Shadow Thieves, and they stomp all holy hell out of any other group that attempts to act illegally in their own territories. The Shadow Thieves well understand the limitations of a criminal enterprise.”

“Which means that it is still likely to come from Baldur’s Gate,” Jaheira said, with Khalid nodding agreement as he filled up his wine glass and that of the two men to either side of him before passing it on. It was obvious both more experienced adventurers agreed with the point the Amnian had raised.

“And I still say no!” Said one of the city-states natives, his fellows joining in hotly. “You’re just trying to paint it like it’s our fault!”

“How dare you?” Said Amnian native scowling angrily. “I’m simply stating facts.”

“And your facts just happened to insult us, calling into question our city and its honor?”

At that point, Imoen realized she wouldn’t hear anything more from this group until they calmed down some more. Rather than wait for that slipped away, leaving Khalid and Jaheira to play peacemakers for a time, moving through the bar area once more. She noticed though that Jaheira seemed to be doing much of the talking, and Khalid more than his share of drinking. And did she notice him glancing at a few of the barmaids too?

Shaking that thought off, Imoen turned her mind to the annoyingly named quest they were all on. *Weird that they are both convinced this problem originates in or the other’s territory, and not really* smart. *After all the Sword Coast is huge!*

Imoen had seen a map back in Candlekeep and estimated it to be at least the length of, say a trip from one side of Italy to the other side of France, although it had nowhere near the width of those nations. *But that’s only because of the ocean to the west, and the massive entirely unexplored forest to the west. Who knew what was out there? Heck, who knows what could be hidden in the Sword Coast itself? Like whoever took over that mine I heard about earlier that could lead to a new quest once I get Harry back in here.* \*Ding\*

Iron Intake Quest has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

Though your opinions might not be shared by others, with all the eyes facing towards Baldur’s Gate or Amn, it leaves the rest of the Sword Coast open. While this doesn’t exactly cut down on where you are searching, it is certainly a step towards doing so. It remains to be seen if you’re correct of course, but hey, baby steps.

Imoen paused, slipping into a shadow not using the thief technique just moving behind a pillar of wood for a moment, glaring up at the message before flicking it away with her finger. *Okay, I’m beginning to see Harry’s point. The weird sense of humor of this Gamer ability of his is disturbing at times.*

Still, thinking about it Imoen had to admit that the game was right. And yet, she still felt the locals were wrong. She didn’t think it was anyone who had **anything** to do with the existing power structures. Too many pies were getting upset by this move for that to really ring true to her. *Follow the money, always follow the money, or whoever benefits, that’s what my instructors, and all those cop shows I watched, say. Always look to who benefits,* She thought to herself, frowning. *I can’t find a money trail, not yet, but Nashkel is the key, where the Iron Intake Issue is coming from. Whatever else is occurring, it’s roots are there.* \*Ding\*

“Oh God dammit!” Imoen shouted. This got her some odd looks from around her, and she winced, quickly making up a story. “Stubbed my toe sorry.”

Everyone else went back to what they were doing and allowed Imoen to read the message that it just appeared her line of sight. ‘*For showing insight and actual forward thinking, something unheard of among most Adventurers, you have heard +1 to Intelligence. Congratulations.’ Ruddy Gamer system.* She glared down at her toe for a moment, then sighed and moved on.

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time that Imoen was making all of these quest boxes appear, Harry was in the Temple of Wisdom dedicated to Garl Glittergold, the chief of the gnomish pantheon of gods. Luckily, he had also inputted a command into his interface meant that those messages appeared high and to the right of his line of sight as little square bars in different colors after the fight with Gorion’s attackers. So he could ignore them to concentrate on his discussion with the priestess of the temple.

She was of the same age as her husband, and just as friendly-looking, but whereas he had dressed in almost somber, sturdy work clothes, she was dressed in a robe, which was made up of tiny patches of colors, all the colors of a rainbow. It matched the decor of the interior of the temple, which was lined with shiny bits of marble in various colors all around, spiral patterns, whirls of colored glass that was quite pretty in a gaudy sort of way.

*At least,* Harry thought *I hope most of them are glass.* *Surely not every temple could afford to showed that kind of wealth right? On the other hand, they are kind of dedicated to a God of gems, lapidaries and protection, so maybe people are afraid of stealing from them.*

Underneath her somewhat amazing robe, Gwyneth was short, what some would’ve called dumpy, but Harry felt was more matronly than anything else. She was the first gnome lady he’d ever seen, but she certainly seemed typical of the type that was talked about in the few fictional stories he had read.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat?” she asked, turning away from what she had been doing, which seemed to have been examining a series of potions in front of her, frowning heavily, the frown disappearing into a wry quirk of the lips as she looked at Harry.

“I was at wondering if you could tell me about where to find temples to for the Gods of Light,” Harry repeated.

She blinked, somewhat looking surprised. “That’s what I thought you said. Most of the time when they ask for directions like that it’s to the temple of a specific god, and even that is rare. Can I ask why?”

“I’m a Paladin, but I grew up in Candlekeep so while I have a lot of the training, I have yet to devote myself to any specific God,” Harry supplied by rote.

“Oh,” the woman said nodding her head rapidly I see. “Yes, paladins do sometimes crop up like that, although, I have to warn you that even if you find a God to worship, your acceptance into the Order of the Radiant Heart is not quite the same thing. I can tell you a bit about temples around here but I’m afraid there aren’t many of them in the Sword Coast.” The matron went on after describing the Order of the Radiant Heart, which was the Order of paladins, active throughout the world. “The Radiant Heart as an organization is somewhat separate from all three churches, although they do answer to them as a whole. You can still be a paladin and not be part of the Order, but it is much harder without that structure.”

As she spoke a quest box appeared. It flashed above Gwyneth’s head at full size since it was something Harry had done himself rather than coming from Imoen.

A new quest has appeared, **Radiant Heart or Radiant Loner**. Congratulations!

The Order of the Radiant Heart is the only game in town if you are a paladin, an order made up by paladins devoted to not one, not two, but all three of the gods of light to make use of Paladins at all. You can be a paladin and not be a member but becoming a member of the Order of the Radiant Heart will open many doors for you in the future. Or it might close them. Who knows? It will be up to you to make that decision.

Despite the tone of the message though, Harry was kind of uninterested in joining any Order just yet. He would need to think about that in the future perhaps, but right now, he just wanted to figure out a way to gain access to the skills that had drawn him to choose to become a paladin in the first place. “How did I not know about them before this?” he asked Gwyneth.

“The Order is actually a relatively new thing in terms of world history. They’ve only been around since the Time of Troubles, and they haven’t actually appeared in many books,” she teased, to which Harry simply nodded conceding her point.

“At any rate, there is a temple on the outskirts of Beregost, the next settlement you’ll find if you’re going south. It’s a decent sized town, although it’s fallen on hard times thanks to bandit raids in the past year or so. The temple is dedicated to Lathander, but that is the only temple between here and the mining town of Nashkel. And there’s no place in Nashkel that worships a God of Light.”

“…Although,” she said, perking up slightly. “There are roving paladins who could give you some information about their patron deities if you ask. A young one who was a member of the Order came through on a quest a few days ago heading east. I rather liked him. And I know another paladin took up station in Beregost right before these recent troubles began.”

She smiled at Harry faintly, as he nodded thanking her for the information. “Now that I’ve answered your question though, could you perhaps answer one of mine?”

Harry blinked at that but nodded politely. “If I can, certainly.”

“Why do I, when I look at you a young soul in a nearly adult body?” He blinked, and she laughed, gesturing around them. “I am a priestess of the Garl Glittergold, who along with protection and gems, is a god of trickery. So we who have devoted ourselves to Glittergold sometimes see truths where others see merely reality. And souls are not nearly as simple as you might think.”

“…I never actually consider them simple in the first place,” Harry said slowly. “You could say that well I’m a traveler of sorts,” he went on, knowing instantly that trying to lie to this woman would not only not work but would be counterproductive. “In another place, I, well I made a mistake, and found myself in this new body here.”

When she nodded with a smile, making a little go on gesture he obeyed. “Rather than try and fail to get home, I decided to make the most of my new life here. My life back home wasn’t… well it wasn’t what I wanted it to be. A lot of things were out of my control, and I didn’t want to be what they perceived me as, or like how other people demanded I become,” Harry said thinking of the Wizarding World’s scary amount of interest in him the vagaries of the public over the year he’d been in Hogwarts, and the Dursley’s and how they had tried to starve magic out of him this summer and before.

“Good for you,” Gwyneth said cheerfully, reaching out to thump him on the arm.

“You’re not going to ask more questions about that?” Harry asked, both relieved and confused.

The older gnome woman laughed gaily. “Nom no. You answered my questions, whatever other secrets you are trying to keep hidden are yours. Trying to discern secrets like that have never been my main calling, seeing the truth as I can occasionally is enough. Still I will ask you, why did you want to be a paladin in this life? That is a very hard life you’ve said yourself, one of constant warfare, quests and doing battle with darkness. Both dark things, and dark individuals at times. You will see the best and the worst humanity and the other races have to offer as a Paladin to a far greater extent than you would in any other job.”

Harry, once more struck by the realization that trying to lie about this would not be a good idea, answered honestly, looking away sheepishly. “Well, I didn’t really think about that kind of long term thing. I’ve always wanted to fight the good fight obviously but well I suppose… isn’t every little boy’s dream to become a knight? And of course, the healing aspect of becoming a Paladin was a major draw.”

“Well that’s one reason to become a paladin,” Gwyneth said with a jolly laugh, slapping her stomach lightly as she leaned back in her chair. At the same time, a green stat notice appeared in his line of vision.

You have passed the test of the priestess Gwyneth, answering her questions truthfully, and showing that you are of a good heart. +1 to wisdom, plus a special item bonus.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that, and she asked, “Although I do have some advice for you if you’re willing to listen?” When Harry nodded, Gwyneth smiled. “First, remember that no matter how harsh this life may be, that you remember to have fun and make it a life worth living.”

“With my friend Imoen along, that at least isn’t a big issue,” Harry said dryly shaking his head as yet another little square glowing rectangle appeared indicating an incoming message of some kind.

“In that case, I wouldn’t recommend Helm to you. He is far too serious and very judgmental. Either Tyr, or Torm would probably work best for you.”

From there, the woman went into a a basic overview of what she thought the two other Gods of Light were like, causing Harry to chuckle as Tyr was described as “not only the God of martyrs, but the God of whiners and whingers. Really, Torm would be much more fun at a party,” she said with a laugh. “Here, take this book.”

She held out a book, the title of which read, ‘An Adventurer’s Guide to the Gods of Light and Darkness.’ “It will no doubt help you a lot as you go on, though I still maintain that mere book learning is no substitute for experience. Still, I think I’ve talked your ear off enough. The point is, knowing yourself is not a simple journey, but a never tapped changing tapestry of experiences and choices, and making certain you devote yourself to the right guide is a step best taken after a lot of thought. Just make certain when you look in a mirror, you like the person is looking back at you. That is the most important thing.”

The side quest (large) Pray for your Future has been updated.

Listening to Gwyneth Mirrorshade has given you more information that will help you move forward in your quest to become a real paladin, little boy. Congratulations. +2000 experience.

Harry smiled at that, knowing 2000 was actually a nice chunk of the experience needed to go on to the next level. Although the fact that it gave me so much experience points for just asking the right questions and getting answers instead of actually fighting or killing someone, sort of showed how much people’s lives were worth here. That was a little disturbing, but thanks to his Gamer’s Mind it didn’t bother him as much as it should.

As Harry looked into the first few pages of the book, Gwyneth asked, “Was there anything else, the old priestess asked. “Because at this point, considering I just handed you a book, which cost me some money to buy in the first place, well, we priests tend to demand a monetary room recompense.”

Harry fumbled in his pouch for a moment, bringing out several gold coins as well as the ring he had found on the corpse of the wizard. “Um yes, could you identify this for me?” Harry knew his intelligence was high enough that he could use the identify skill himself, but he had never seen how someone went about using the skill before and apparently he had to, since his first attempt to identify the ring hadn’t worked, nothing changing nor did any message box appear.

The woman nodded, and held up the ring to her eyes, spinning it thoughtfully, then looking at it through a series of refractions of light from above. Then she nodded. “This is a ring of wizardry; it adds to the number of spells that a wizard can memorize per day below the spell level three.”

You have learned identify:

This is a skill based on your own knowledge, along with your intelligence and wisdom stats combined then divided by half. You will have better luck identifying simple items, rather than more difficult ones, but as you learn about the world, and your knowledge base and stats, so too will your ability with this skill and what information you can glean with it about unknown items.

“Thank you,” Harry said, paying the hundred gold crowns for the identify spell, and then 50 more for her advice despite Bentley having said he would get access to that skill of his wife’s for free..

A hundred and fifty gold coins was chump change for what Harry had learned today, even if it would normally have cut into his and Imoen’s budget given how short a time they’d been on the road. But Harry had a bit of a trick there: the jewels he had collected during the tutorial phase back in Candlekeep. Harry had a total of five hundred forty seven lynx eye gems which he could sell to make some quick cash. Each alone wasn’t worth much, but given the sheer number of them he had, Harry knew they could make him a lot of money, so long as he was careful how and when to sell them.

“Thank you young one. Bentley might have told me to help you with identify for free, but well, my church does need to pay its own upkeep. A sense of independence is necessary in a marriage like ours,” she said chuckling. “I hope that your quests go as well as they can in this imperfect world of ours, and remember what I said, always remember to know yourself.”

Harry nodded, and turned exiting the temple. Outside he paused in a patch of shadow to go over the message boxes that had built up in his peripheral vision from Imoen, shaking his head as he noted she had upgraded her ‘Flirty Little Lass’ Life Skill. He also saw the Quest notices, and smiled at how much progress she’d made, although learning she couldn’t’ take, quests for them was something of a mixed bag.

*On the one hand, she can’t sign us up for something silly or promise that we’ll go out of our way.* Having lived with her for more than half a year by this point Harry had a very good grasp of Imoen/Tonks’s personality. *On the other hand, it would hurry things along at times. Still, not a big deal right now.*

Entering the inn he found Imoen still working the crowd. She spotted him almost as fast as he had spotted her, waving her hand. “There’s my buddy now!” She said expansively, waving a tankard of ale around and gesturing Harry over to join her. She had found her way back to the woman who had yelled about spiders, thinking it might be another quest, and had been proven right a moment ago. “This young laaaady here,” she said slurring her words slightly and very deliberately. “hasss an issue with some spiders down in Beregost.”

Harry nodded agreeably, having seen a notice to that affect a moment ago. What’s your name miss and what kind of trouble are we talking about?” A few minutes of conversation later, a new quest message box appeared in a blue color, although the Gamer’s continued use of alliteration made Imoen conk her head against the table.

“You have agreed to the quest (minor) Spider Splatter:

The weaver Landrin has a rather ironic problem in the form of an infestation of spiders in her house. Get Rid of these overgrown insects and you will be rewarded.

Reward: two hundred gold, plus an extra fifty for every spider killed.

However Harry saw something Imoen didn’t, a little odd button like addition to the bottom of the message box which read ‘haggle possible’.

Thinking quickly, Harry slowly nodded. “Well miss, my party is going that way, and I can certainly say we’d be up to the job. The reward also sounds good, but I was wondering if, once we clear out the house, could we have use of it while we are in Beregost? Obviously you’re comfortable enough here, but our business might have us staying in the town or to the south of it for some time, so having a house of our own would be very nice. I can promise we’ll clean up after ourselves,” he said with a wink.

The old woman smiled at him and harry saw two more messages appear.

Charisma Check Passed. You have convinced an elderly woman that you can be trusted to look after her home for her, what are you, a teenager?

The second read:

Your first attempts to haggle was, successful though you aimed low. That could be a good thing, but perhaps next time, you can figure out how to really use that Potter Luck enhanced Charisma of yours?

From there Imoen led Harry around to several other people she’d met. The next conversation was with a dwarf woman who had decided to make an early night of it, retreating to her room after having met Imoen earlier. She led Harry up, and to her room, where they were let in without much preamble.

“You want us to what?” Harry asked a moment later, frowning.

“Return a girdle,” the dwarf woman said, growling. “Are you an idiot, or just hard of hearing? said. She was the first dwarf woman that Harry had met, and she was exactly how you would envision a dwarf woman, stout, with muscles and a large chest, although she didn’t look nearly as stout (read as fat) as most rumors made them out to be.

“That’s what I thought you said. Um, how exactly did you lose this girdle?” Harry asked, wondering what ‘girdle’ meant here, and hoped it only meant a belt of some kind rather than anything else it could be.

“I was waylaid by an ogre who has some kind of fixation on girdles. He forced me to choose between my girdle and my life, and well, the decision was quite obvious. But I still I would like it back. I will pay 100 gold coins for its return,” the dwarf, Unshey, replied.

Harry nodded slowly reading the notice as it popped up thinking, then slowly nodded as he once more attempted to haggle. “150, plus I think, and the cost of any healing spells we might need after.”

Another Charisma check failed here, and Unshey refused, but still offered them the quest, so Harry decided to take this with a grain of salt and move on. At the same time however, she was staring at Harry’s forehead.

Having gotten out of the habit of expecting that kind of thing in his new life where the scar on his forehead was just one scar among several his new body had rather than a symbol of his status as the Boy-With-Hyphens, Harry finally got fed up with it and asked, “excuse me, but is something wrong?”

“Hmm, no, not, not wrong exactly,” Unshey said, frowning. “It’s just, I have to wonder why you carved out what looks like a rune of protection on your forehead.”

“What?” Harry asked, blinking while Imoen’s face radiated confusion.

“You didn’t know? That scar on your forehead matches a rune of protection, one that is connected to Clangeddin Silverbeard, one he, it has been written, actually received from Lord Ao the Over-God. I’ve seen it on temples occasionally devoted to the god of battle, and at times on the armor of some of his priests.”

Clangeddin Silverbeard was not the head of the dwarven pantheon, but he was a Lawful Good deity whose portfolio was war, honor, and blacksmithing. That was almost all Harry knew about him, though he had heard that he was called on more by war leaders and those seeking wisdom in war than for courage or anything else.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it,” Harry said, frowning.

Unshey shrugged. “It could be a coincidence, who knows, stranger things have happened. It just caught me by surprise is all.”

You have discovered a Side Quest (unknown) Fate Marked or Just Marked? Congratulations.

The dwarf Unshey is positive that the scar on your forehead, which once marked you as the Boy-Who-Lived, is a rune of protection from a dwarven god on this plane. This is, needless to say, extremely unusual, and something you will no doubt need to follow up on… somehow… in the future. But perhaps knowing what it is, and figuring out what happened that night when your parents gave their lives for you, would be an important down the line.

Unknown reward for completion.

The unknown was interesting, Harry reflected, but he also realized that this was one quest that would almost undoubtedly go unresolved. He glanced sideways and Imoen shook her head, indicating she had no idea either and Harry believed her. Imoen had told Harry all she could remember about the Potters, who she’d met when she was a toddler. Still, for now there was nothing they could do about it, and when he spoke, he had moved back to the quest Unshey was offering.

“Well, that’s interesting, but I think we’re done here. Be aware though that we won’t be going out of our way to return your lost girdle to you after we reclaim it from this ogre. We have business down in Nashkel. We might be able to send it back this way with a caravan from Beregost. If we do, you can leave our payment with Bentley.” Harry said, to which Unshey agreed.

They called Bentley up to witness it, and then Harry and Imoen left Unshey in her room with her books. They spoke about the odd new quest for a time, coming to no conclusions before they made it back into the main bar room.

Imoen and Harry went on from there to collect two minor quests that they could perform on the way down to Beregost, although they would have to return to the Friendly Arm Inn to collect their rewards in most cases. Imoen had also found bounties: money that would be paid for specific criminals or proof of the death of various criminal types: bandits, ogres, and hobgoblins. Hair for the bandits, ears for the ogres, and fingers for the hobgoblins.

That made Harry a little queasy to think of but given the trouble those bands were making in the area, Harry couldn’t say he didn’t see the logic behind offering money for their extermination. He was more interested in the other quests and the use of haggling, which didn’t seem to be a set skill, but rather a bonus that connected to his charisma stat.

*Still, the use of Landrin’s house while we’re in Beregost seems to have been the best reward so far. If we are going to stay there to search around for any clues about the iron shortage* o*r if I want going to check in at the temple of Lathander having a house to stay in will just make everything more pleasant.*

The most important quest Imoen found though revolved around the mine to the northeast. Engaging the middle-aged trader who had spoken about it before, Harry let Imoen do the talking for a time.

The man gave them a bit more background about the mine, and when they had been forced to close. “Aye, bandits have been seen in the area, a mix of hobgoblins and human bandits. A ranger came in here a few days back, asking about that mine too. The problem is, it’s so far out into the wilds that it’s deucedly hard to get to, now that the miners aren’t keeping the road clear. But the lands worth a lot of money, even so. They’d just found a vein of silver to hear a few ex-miners tell it any road. If that’s the truth or just boasts I don’t know, but I’ll tell you this: if that’s the case, and you can stake your own claim on the mines, silver or no, it would make you money hand over fist given the troubles with the mines down south near Nashkel. Or if you so wanted, you could clear it out, and inform the Baldur’s Gate Council you had. They’d pay you your weight in gold for that alone.”

A Main Quest, Iron Intake issue has been updated. You have discovered a clue.

You have learned that other mines I the area have suffered hugely due to the iron shortage, many of them being turned into dens for demi-humans. This then adds to the general upheaval going around the sword coast. But this also means that the reach of those behind the Iron shortage grows over time. Perhaps you can then hurt them in turn by taking out these side operations?

You have discovered all the information to the Main Quest Iron Intake Issue available in your current vicinity. To discover more you must travel to Nashkel, one of the main sources of this problem.

Rewards: + 1000 experience to all Party members, + 1 to the wisdom of all party members. Warning: these kind of bonuses will only cross over to those party members at relationship **Friend** or higher.

Harry barely had time to purse his lips in surprise, having realized that this plus his earlier quest had allowed him to cover a full fourth of the way to his next level up, before another message box appeared.

A Side Quest (Large) Has been found. This quest is one you do not have to accept or act on. The rewards will vary depending on the difficulty (size) of the quest.

Mine, Mine: The mines in Nashkel are not the only mines currently running into hard times. You have heard tell of a mine to the northwest that has become home to demi-humans and bandits. Defeat the current ‘owners’ and take over the mines, and you will be rewarded, or can take the land for itself if you are strong enough.

Rewards: 80,000 or more gold, ownership of a silver mine and long term income of 2,000 gold for every week you are within the Sword Coast territory.

As soon as it was polite, Harry and Imoen pulled away, looking at one another in some shock. “Damn.”

“Damn!” Imoen replied, nodding her head eagerly. “I think we know what we’re going to be doing after we clear up the Iron Intake Issue.”

“Maybe,” Harry prevaricated. “Remember this is the real world Imoen, time and other people can effect what we do.”

Spotting the Obvious: For stating the truly, utterly, easily seen by a child obvious, you have won + 1 Intelligence.

Harry and Imoen gave one another deadpan stares, shaking their heads. “Snarky arse Gamer skill,” Imoen muttered.

Lips twitching in a grimace Harry was about to reply when he heard a name he he had heard before when he was back in Candlekeep reading about strange monsters. The book he had been reading at the time didn’t have enough information apparently to activate the bestiary Harry that he had been able to access since exiting the tutorial, but the name of the anima now caught his attention.

He moved over in that direction, pulling out a chair across from a fat, if quite tall human farmer. He looked well into his cups, his hands shaking, his eyes bloodshot. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear what you were just saying,” Harry began. “Could you say it again. My companions and I might be able to help”

The man looked up blearily, then burped, sending a waft of smelly air into Harry’s face causing him to recoil slightly. “My farm, my farms completely overcrowded with those, those damn ankheg! Killed most of my cattle they did, moved in before I could even try to stop him. Not that I could damn ankheg are as tough as they are ornery.”

“And are you offering a bounty for them?” Harry asked slowly, hoping not to spook the man.

“Nah lad,” the man said, picking up his bottle face twisting into a parody of a sly smile. “Sold the land I did, moment they showed up. Got a pretty penny for it too, and then hightailed it here, before the buyer understood what they were buying.” He cackled at that, draining the glass. “Going to just drink my days sit my life away right here thank you kindly.”

Charisma Check Passed. The Drunkard across from you likes the cut of your furrow and is willing to tell you something actually important for your lending him an ear.

“Although, come to think of it,” he said setting his cup down after the charisma check past. “I think that the blacksmith down in Beregost is offering some money for ankheg hides. Apparently you can use their hides to make a good suit of armor. Light enough to be leather, but strong enough to stop steel.”

“Interesting,” Harry said with a nod as another side quest, medium turned up in his line of sight and he stood up, pushing the stein of beer Imoen had pushed into his hands across to the other man. “I’ll have to look that up. Thank you for the information.”

“That was a good find,” she said. “That armor sounds dead useful. Especially if it’s so light, since that might mean I could use it.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Harry said the grin. “I read about those creatures in a book back in Candlekeep, and how their hide could be turned into armor like that. I figure we’ll have to sell to a few for any one set of armor, but that’s still very good.”

“well, unless you think there’s another quest like that around, we’re all done here,” Imoen said stretching. “I didn’t find any more people offering quests when I was working the crowd, so I think it’s time to head up to Jaheira and Khalid. They went up about an hour ago, although it’d be fairer to say Jaheira was dragging Khalid away from the wine than anything else.”

Harry nodded agreement and the two of them moved over to the stairs. As they ascended however, Harry Imoen leaned in, grasping Harry’s arm and whispering in his ear. “By the way, I think the two lovers are going to ambush us. I’ve noticed both of them giving us some odd looks over the past few days, and Jaheira certainly noticed our use of the Shield Spell during the battle even if Khalid didn’t. They’re going to have questions about that at the very least.”

Harry frowned, scratching at his neck thoughtfully. “Okay, thanks for the heads up.”

They finished the ascending the staircase to the fourth floor, in silence then Imoen asked “Come on, the least you could do is tell me if you’ve got a plan. How are we going to play this?”

“Why are you asking me? You’re the one that’s supposed to be the senior one here after all,” Harry quipped.

She just gave him a deadpan stare, then said simply “Leadership, tactics and the Gamer ability? Do these words ring a bell?”

Know yourself, Harry thought to himself, know yourself as another message box appeared in his line of sight. Judging by her start, Imoen saw it too. It read:

Warning: a major decision in how you and the Harper Couple will interact has been activated.

Jaheira, the suspicious one of the duo, has noticed yours and Imoen’s odd abilities and is planning to question you about them. How will you explain your odd strengths and abilities to them? And what will the long term consequences be?

If you are found to be lying what will the effect be? You honestly trust two people you’ve only known for a few weeks? Can you see yourself traveling with them for longer than it takes you to find Gorion’s killer? If not, can you trust them to not share what they learn from you? Choose your course wisely!

But despite that, it was Gwyneth’s earlier words that stuck in Harry’s head, and which made him reply as he did. “I’m not good at lying, despite what I was able to do earlier with the innkeeper I’m not very comfortable with prevarication. That being said there are some things that I don’t think we need to be sharing, ever.”

Imoen looked at him quizzically and he elaborated. “The tutorial for example, that experience going to stay between the two of us. And the idea of coming from another world and taking over these bodies too. Maybe eventually we can both say that you know we were merged into them like you and the original Imoen were, but nothing about my whole character creation thing or the tutorial. The power over the world implied by it is too damn scary.”

To that Imoen could only nod in agreement.

“On the other hand, I think we can play it pretty straight with a lot of my Gamer abilities. We won’t call it the Gamer though, that’s lame. The Advanced Adventurer Skill perhaps?”

“Hmm, that might work,” Imoen said with a nod. “I don’t think it’s how I would play it, I don’t know if I would tell them anything, I mean yes we’re kind of friendly with them, but our relationship status has hasn’t changed much, and Jaheira’s an extremely trying woman.”

Harry shrugged. He felt much the same occasionally, but sometimes, Jaheira was actually quite nice. When she was teaching them woodcraft and other stuff like that, Harry had seen the person within her prickly exterior coming out.

“Regardless, that’s how we’ll play it,” he said definitively. “We’ll talk the about the Gamer ability or rather the Advanced Adventurer and abilities, all of them that we can, because I think in so doing, we’ll be able to get a lot more out of them eventually. Remember they are a lot more experienced and knowledgeable about the world than we are. They could be a major help.”

As Imoen had warned, Jaheira quickly ambushed them, smiling thinly at them as she stood up from where she had been sitting at the main room’s small table. “Excellent, there you are. Perhaps now can finally get some straight answers out of you. You showed abilities and skills that no Level Five thief or Level Six paladin should have. “What are you? How were you able to protect us from the fireball? What are you hiding?

Harry growled, furious suddenly. Questions like this reminded him all too easily about how the kids at Hogwarts had demanded to know everything about him, or how he’d lost Gryffindor the points he and Ron had after helping Charlie pick up Hagrid’s dragon. It had gotten worse at the end of the year, and Harry had hated it. “Jaheira, shut up!”

The woman backed away quickly, scowling angrily at his tone. “This isn’t the first time you have treated us Imoen and I like like we’re second-class citizens just because we’re young. Stop it. We might be young even for humans let alone half-elves, but we are adventurers too, and this is our adventure just as much as it is yours if not more. You acknowledged us as such didn’t you? And we agreed from the outset of this arrangement between us, that we would be equals.”

He deflated a little, shaking his head. “I understand where your questions are coming from, and I will answer them, but not like this, not like some one-sided interrogation!”

Jaheira frowned, then nodded looking almost sheepish as she backed away, moving back to the table and sighing as she saw even her husband’s eyes on her in condemnation. “I’m sorry. I realize that came off more harshly than I intended. But you have to understand, those shields of yours, we have seen others use such of course, but they were mages. You two are obviously not mages. How were you able to re-create them, what kind of skills are they based off of? That could be huge in the future. And before that, there were other clues as to the two of you hiding something. Your strength and physical abilities abilities are too high, and there have been flashes of, of some kind of secret between the two of you. Things that have grated on my nerves the more I noticed them.”

“It h, hints at something, something th, a, that Gorion told us at one point,” Khalid added, looking at the two youngsters sadly. “Something, th, th, that could be dan, dangerous. Very dangerous. M, my wife’s concerns, ar, are not just about the secret y, you are keeping, b, but the dan, danger it rep, represents.”

“What?” Harry asked, looking at him askance, and Khalid frowned, looking away. He twisted his gaze to Jaheira as Imoen sat next to the woman. She looked between the two youngsters, then back at Harry, her face still apologetic for earlier but she didn’t look away from his gaze. “Okay…. If we are going to keep travelling, I do want to come clean. But in return, you need to tell me what you mean by that, and you might need to help us understand what we are able to do. And you have to promise that, whatever else, you will keep what we tell you to yourselves. Not even your fellow Harpers can be told.”

One eyebrow rising in eloquent query, Jaheira stared back at Harry for a moment, then nodded sharply, while, to his surprise, Harry didn’t see any Charisma check or anything similar. It was evident that whatever else, this decision was based on more than his stats. “Very well. We will tell you why we are worried, and we will help you discover the, the limitations of this power you are so subtly hinting at. And as to keeping your secret, I give you my word I will do so unless you prove to be a threat to the stability of the world that we Harpers are sworn to protect.”

Imoen scowled but Harry nodded. “That’s fair. First, I have to explain a single skill I’ve had since I hit puberty. It’s called the Advanced Adventurer skill.”

Harry briefly explained how his Gamer system worked, and the control, experience and stats. There, Imoen broke in explaining her own stats, saying that she had eighty-eight points spread out through her various physical and mental abilities, discounting the point’s she’d won during that night.

“That is h, higher than, it, it should b, b, be,” Khalid said thoughtfully staring at the two of them. “F, far more for yo, you, your levels.”

“And it sounds as if, correct me if I’m wrong, but you said ‘to use’ when you mentioned that you had leveled up recently. But when you level up young man, your stats are automatically integrated into your abilities by how you leveled up?” Jaheira asked.

“Thanks to my Advanced Adventurer ability, I can put those stat points where we want them to go for both of us,” Harry said with a shrug. “Imoen leveled up after the fight against the attackers that night with Gorion, and I distributed her points the way she wanted me to one to constitution and intelligence, and two to strength.”

“I felt the results right away too, I was able to carry about ten, maybe twelve pounds more because of that,” Imoen said with a nod.

Khalid and Jaheira stared at them in shock, and Khalid asked hesitantly, “You, your sta, st, stat points Harry, h, how many do, do you have?”

Harry shrugged and instead of answering, pulled up his stat sheet itself, hitting the level up button and then being directed to the physical stat sheet which he read aloud, leaving out his skills and background notes as well as his gender and name, considering them unnecessary to this discussion:

“**Class:** Paladin level 5

Strength: (19)

Willpower: (11) +9 + 1

Dexterity: (16)

Constitution: (12) +7

Durability: (10)

Wisdom: (8) + 7

Charisma: (11) +4

Intelligence: (6) +11

Luck: (8) +/- 4”

“And I have four stat points to distribute,” he finished.

Khalid seemed in a bit of shock. “Th, that is at least tw, tw, twice as high as it should be.”

“And much more balanced than a paladin’s normally would be. The ability to put your stats where you want them, that is a game changer,” Jaheira muttered, more interested in that aspect than the actual numbers.

Harry coughed, hiding a laugh at how his words her words referenced the actual name of his abilities, nodding his head. “I gathered that much from talking to Imoen once she joined my party as it were and was able to activate it.

Eyes narrowing in thought, Jaheira stated, “And by that I have to assume that despite traveling with you, we have not joined your party. What does that entail?”

“No, I’m afraid you haven’t. As to what it entails, how much of my abilities carry over to you is based on our mutual trust and respect, our relationships between one another.”

Jaheira winced at that, knowing it was a comment on her personality just as much as anything else. But she refused to be brow beaten to change that personality, shaking her head.

“Wh, what about skills?” Khalid asked.

There there wasn’t much of a difference at least in terms of combat related skills.

“Th, this explains much. S, skill points w, work much the same for you a, as they would for anyone else, b, b, but you have missed out ce, certain things that you sh, sh, should’ve learned. This ability of yours does not give you e, e, experience, but ra, ra, rather abilities that you must then ho, ho, hone.” Khalid said looking at Harry thoughtfully.

Harry nodded, understanding his point. “Yes, I actually got a minor quest to incorporate what you were teaching me about footwork and body control when you started to spar with me. I’m nearly finished and looking forward to the combat bonus I’ll get.”

“Hmm… a, and if you learn a new ski, skill, say kn, knife throwing, you, you would be able to th, throw the knife, but would, wouldn’t have the knowledge of i, i, it’s weight, wha, what happens after it lea, leaves the hand. Int, interesting, but not w, world shattering.”

“But with that said, what can be shared between you two, and what is your relationship level?” Jaheira asked, moving on quickly. It was indeed obvious that whatever else, Harry’s physical abilities were close to what they should be whatever this Advanced Adventurer system did for him. But the way he and Imoen worked together in a fight hinted at more.

“We can share certain abilities, both those that need to be activated and which can occur automatically. I gained the ability to backstab for example from Imoen, among other skills, and if I activate Turn Undead, the aura can also start to flow out from her.

“Harry can also use my Blood Mage skills,” Imoen explained, the two of them agreeing she should take the credit for that. The name made the two half-elves eyes widen, and they stayed that way as she explained that their spells used life force rather than mana.

“That explains where those shields came from,” Jaheira said, shaking her head. “Do you need any more healing to deal with that?” Both youngsters shook their heads, and she asked, “Does this adventurer System have anything to do with your Item box?”

“Oh yeah, that and it also has a map, which can update me where enemies are.” Harry said with a nod. “Both Imoen and I can access our item boxes at will, and can create what are called quick slots, which we can fill with weapons and maybe other things eventually. It makes for easy access to whatever we’re carrying.”

“Je, je, jealousy is rising fr, fr, from deep within me,” Khalid muttered, his lips twitching to showing he was joking. Mostly.

The questioning went on from there for several hours, moving from whether or not Gorion knew, to how they had pushed their stats so high, although there, both Imoen and Harry tried to ask questions about the older adventurer’s levels, getting nothing in return except a flinch from Jaheira and a sigh from Khalid that said whatever it was, was very serious.

The idea of getting some stat bonuses like Harry and Imoen did was intensely fascinating, an idea they had not come upon before and one they were interested to see the reality of in the future. Further, getting such during conversations, and getting clues like Harry and Imoen described for quests, was just as interesting. But it always came back to the fact that neither of them was at the ‘Friends’ relationship level.

Yet the questioning did tell Harry just how unique his AA (Advanced Adventurer) Skill was in the amount of control it gave him. Jaheira was impressed with the item box, Khalid with his states, but Harry was interested in the level up system they described, which was highly limited.

First, half-elves only got two stat points per level, with a quarter point added to dexterity or Wisdom randomly with every level. This had made those stats very lopsided, made worse by the fact they couldn’t control where those stats were spent. Instead, as Jaheira had said earlier, where the stat points went was determined by what you had done to level up. If you were in a fight, you could get strength, dexterity or durability. If you did it while completing a quest, it varied wildly. So their stats, which they did not share, looking guilty but adamant about it, were all over the place. For example, Jaheira’s strength was almost as low as Imoen’s but her dexterity and willpower were in the high thirties.

“That explains so much,” Harry said aloud as she said that.

“Oh~?” Jaheira drawled, crossing her arms and mock-glaring at him. “And what exactly do you mean by that?”

“Er, I meant your skill with the sling of course,” Harry quickly replied, quickly, smiling innocently. “What did you think I meant?”

Charisma Check failed. Jaheira has not believed your obvious attempt to cover your ass. Luckily, Jaheira knows herself far too well to care what other people think about her personality.

“I’m certain it was,” Jaheira replied with an eyeroll.

The quest function was different as well, and the identify function, and the idea of Charisma being directly linked to whether or not you could bargain or have a lie be believed was also fascinating. Imoen shared their quest journal, her and Harry taking turns reading aloud all the points they had found, and both Jaheira and Khalid were impressed with the skill and with the way Imoen had been able to find all that information.

Eventually the married couple’s fascination with Harry’s AA skill began to wane, and Harry could finally turn the discussion – for that was what it had become thankfully – back to what Khalid had hinted at the very beginning, which Harry very much feared would be this world’s version of the Boy-Who-Lived nonsense.

“Now you tell us, Harry said turning to Jaheira, since she had settled into the role of talking for both herself and Khalid as the discussion continued. “What did you two think we were. Why do you think we have these powers? What did Gorion hint at that Khalid mentioned earlier.

The married couple exchanged a glance, and for a moment, it looked as if Khalid was going to suggest they not say anything, but for all that she was up confrontational and prickly as all get out, Jaheira was honest to a fault. Or at least as honest as a Harper could be. When she gave her word, she meant it.

“He’s right,” Imoen said with a nod. You both think there’s something unusual about Harry, and come to think about it, I can kind of see it too. I mean come on, orphan boy, raised on his own in a sheltered keep, then the instant he gets let out into the world, he gets ambushed by some mad armored giant? Doesn’t take big brains to see that there’s something going on there.”

As Harry growled at her in mock anger, Jaheira spoke in her abrupt, to the point manner. “You are both correct. What do you know about the Time of Troubles?”

Imoen frowned, not getting it, and Harry began to think then remembered. “The Time of Troubles ended about nineteen, twenty years ago? It was a called that because a few evil gods attempted to steal Ao the Over-God’s power, only to fail. When the attempted theft was discovered, they didn’t step forward, and the Over God decided to punish all the Gods by throwing all of the gods but Helm out of heaven, right? Forced them to walk among humans. …Something like four gods died in think. Including all three of the gods who were actually behind the attempted theft and the goddess of magic I think. There is no one book that covers all of what happened during that age though, so I think that could be wrong.

“Actually, that is essentially correct Jaheira said with a nod. She looked over at Khalid, before going on slowly. “…But it is wrong to say that the Time of Troubles ended twenty years ago it in fact ended near to eighteen years ago. And there have been persistent rumors over the past few years that one of the gods who died, the God of Murder, Bhaal, had anticipated his death and had created… call them vessels which would contain portions of his power. Eventually those part parts would come together, and he would be reborn. But as they are buried in the individual, until then they give those individuals powers beyond the norm.

“Okaaay, what are you talking about when you say vessel?” Harry asked frowning. Between him and Jaheira Imoen gasped, scowling and running a hand down her face in exasperation as if she understood where the store was going.

“T, t, tell me H, Harry,” Khalid said, patting the young man’s hand. “D, do you r, remember anything about your father? About l, l, life before Gorion found y, y you?”

“Yes,” Harry said instantly, nodding his head I remember my mother, she had red hair, and a bright smile, she’s where I get my eyes and hair. But why are you asking?”

“The way th, th, that the Bhaal created his ves, vessels was by spawning them,” Khalid said, hesitating before spitting it out quickly. “He did so by im, impregnating women of all r, r, races except possibly dragons by ap, ap, appearing in their minds, and th, th, then simply well doing the dead,” He said finishing lamely while Jaheira rolled her eyes, knowing he was annoyed to speak so in front of her and Imoen.

“Are you telling me, that this murder God basically intends to survive by sticking his soul into women he sexed up!?” Imoen asked. She might have gotten there sooner than Harry, but she didn’t like the conclusion she’d reached for that. “How does that even work!”

At the same time that Imoen was asking that question, Harry’s eyes strayed to a new message, it’s importance denoted by the solid gold outline. On it read the message:

Your Bloodline Skills has been updated. You know now you are a Bhaalspawn. Increased Stat growth in comparison to normal Adventurers.

*So this is why me… and Imoen too, get so many stat points per level, when normal Adventurers don’t grow nearly as fast. Still, not exactly important, although it might point out why that guy had targeted me. Not that I care.*

Main Quest Vengeance or Justice Has been updated. You know why you were targeted now.

You are a son of the god of murder, and either the armored giant - or his possible employer - could also be one, aiming to kill you for this bloody competition. Does this change anything? How can it? How can it not, knowing that your father figure was killed by or on the orders of your half-brother?

*Half-brother my arse. He’s no brother of mine, and Bhaal’s no father. This, all of this is like the Boy Who Lived. That might describe what I am because of fate, but it doesn’t describe who I am, because that is my decision now, and always will be.*

As Harry finished dismissing those two messages, Jaheira was speaking.

“These soul fragments will be driven to fight one another, and when one kills another, the portion of god-soul within the one who has died will transfer itself into the winner. There have been four documented cases of such events occurring that the Harpers know about, and there are probably **far** more that we don’t. We have no way of knowing how many offspring the God of Murder left behind after all, or how violent such a confrontation and later joining will be,” Jaheira said before going on more slowly, her expression compassionate as she looked at Harry. “And the majority of the women he impregnated were worshipers of his.”

Coming back to the present, Harry’s eyes narrowed dangerously at that. “Mine wasn’t,” he said firmly.

“Can you really be so sure?” Jaheira challenged.

“My mother was no murder man-whore worshiper!” Harry shouted, getting upset despite his Gamer’s Mind – which he hadn’t mentioned to the married couple – interfering in his becoming so. Any such comment directed to his mother annoyed him, since his few memories of her had, during his younger years, been his sole source of love amidst the neglect and contempt of the Dursleys.

Jaheira blinked, while Khalid and Imoen both burst out into laughter. “Where did that come from?” Imoen shouted amidst her peals of laughter.

“What?! It’s appropriate, after all we’re talking about this guy having hundreds, thousands of children after all, all with different women. What would you call him?”

“A lucky bastard?” Imoen quipped with a laugh. “I mean if he hadn’t died, think of all the money he’d have to spend to make the women keep their mouths shut.”

“A G, god?” Khalid asked quizzically.

Jaheira just rolled her eyes once more, staring at them all. “You’re all mad,” she intoned, before pointing at Harry. “But you were saying?”

Harry smiled, and it was this not the smile of someone who was being questioned about something that he shouldn’t remember. No, that expression was of a little boy, despite his age, remembering a sweet memory. “I remember her. For a long time, it was all I could remember. Before Gorion found me. My best memories. A redheaded woman, she cared for me a lot, picked me up, hugged me, played with me sometimes, and then gave her life against the bandits to protect me.”

He sighed, deflating a little realizing that even with that, he couldn’t explain how he knew that his mother wasn’t a murder hobo believer. After all, those are the memories of a baby, and Gorion had taken him in when he was but a toddler. So how could he later learn about his parents as he did when he was just Harry Potter instead of Harry Potter, possible murder-man-whore’s son.

But, he realized that maybe that didn’t matter. “I can’t prove or disprove the fact that she wasn’t worshiper of the murder God. But I can tell you that she loved me. And I think she love me for me, died to protect me. I’m sorry, but that’s just how I feel.”

“And!” Imoen said triumphantly “we just meant a dwarf named Unshey who said something about your scar. She said it was a rune of protection connected to one of their gods.”

Unlike Harry, Imoen had known Lily Potter for a few years when she was a toddler. She had really liked the lady, and she wasn’t about to let them say anything about her. James, she would’ve defended too of course, he was easily her favorite non-blood related uncle, who you know didn’t turn into a a murderous assassin. But like Harry she could tell that this was the way the game was set up, that the body that Harry inhabited was indeed the body of a Bhaalspawn.

Jaheira stared at Harry, then nodded slowly. “I believe you. The way you speak of her, it’s obvious that you do retain those memories, and now that I think about it, the idea of that scar on your forehead being a ward of protection makes some sense.”

“Good,” Harry said with a nod before sighing. “But I can’t argue against the idea of my father being this Bhaal. So, so does this change anything? Harry asked staring between Khalid and Jaheira.

“No it does not,” she said briskly shaking her head. “Would I prefer not to travel with someone who is almost undoubtedly going to attract trouble like dung attract flies, certainly. But I’m a Harper, and it is our job to look out for trouble. So perhaps trouble coming to us instead of the other way around will save time.”

“I feel so loved right now really,” Harry said dryly. “But what I meant was, do you think that this means you will will trust us more?

The married couple exchanged glances and then Jaheira nodded firmly. “Yes. You didn’t have to be so open about your Advanced Adventurer abilities as you call it, and the skills it gives you are quite obviously real. Real and truly amazing. But, trust is not something that can be formed just like that. While I trust you more and even respect you a bit for how you comported yourself during this conversation, that doesn’t mean I’m willing to cross the line into honest friendship. That’s takes longer to build.”

Harry nodded. “I can live with that,” he said, reading off a notice box that had just appeared.

Congratulations! Due to your honest, forthright, and above all, pragmatic, manner you have earned respect and trust with Jaheira and Khalid, not turned them aside or convinced them you should be locked up in a loony bin.

You have gained 5,000 Trust and 5,400 Respect with Jaheira. You are at 5225/10,000 Trust, and 5530/10,000 Respect with Jaheira. Jaheira now views you as a Travelling Companion.

Not a real relationship change, this title implies that she trusts you to have her back in battle and to travel with her, while also respecting your sense of honor, yet at the same time still not being a true friend.

Note: Though Traveling Companions do not receive the benefits of fully integrating into the party, they will gain the advantage of certain combat abilities relating to tactics. Your Leadership will also be effected by how you treat your Travelling Companions as well as your party member(s).

You have gained 400 trust, 250 Respect with Khalid. You have 680/1000 Trust and 550/1000 Respect with Khalid.

While not as impressed by your attitude, Khalid is even closer to calling you friend due to his more trusting, friendly nature, and also will now see you as a Travelling Companion. So long as your cause remains just and moves along the same lines as their own quest as Harpers, these two will remain with you and Imoen, even if they aren’t yet truly part of your party.

*Holy freaking hell, that’s awesome! There might be a light at the end of the tunnel that is getting Jaheira to be a friend after all!* Harry thought, but wisely kept to himself.

“Well, you’d have to, won’t you?” Jaheira said with a laugh, and the others all laughed too. Imoen shook her head, chuckling to herself internally at how the two powerful wills of Harry and Jaheira had clashed during this conversation before she shrugged saying, “Well, in that case, I’m knackered. And I suppose we have an early day tomorrow.”

“In, indeed, I w, w, want to see this map o, o, of yours, and what you called an enemy z, zone in action,” Khalid said briskly. “To b, bed everyone, an, and we will s, see you tomorrow.”

The next morning Imoen had thought she would wake up with a migraine, but upon blinking away the now normal ‘you have rested and recuperated” message she blinked, her eyes going wide as her headache was not there. “Okay, I just learned a new thing about your AA skill Harry, I realized that this gamer thing was messing with our sleep before this, but getting rid of my hangover, now **that** is amazing.”

In the bed across from her own, Harry rolled over his eyes showing he too had gone from asleep to wide awake with no intervening steps.

Whatever Harry said, shrugging his shoulders that and flipping his legs out all out of the bed. He stood up, stretching and cracking his back and shoulders, shaking his head. “You’re right the AA is great for sleeping, but it just feels still unnatural.”

“Hah, at least you had months on end to get used to it. I only started to see that aspect after we formed our party,” Imoen replied.

Outside, Harry found Khalid and Jaheira waiting for them. Jaheira was sipping at a mug of tea of some kind, while Khalid was sipping at a stag and of ale, the woman looking slightly worse the wear for their late night while the man was showing red eyes and keeping to the shadows. *Huh, I suppose he decided to go for what I’ve heard called ‘the hair of the dog solution’.*

Harry nodded to them both and sat down asking if they either of them had ordered breakfast. Khalid answered in the affirmative and stated that they were also already packed. “You and Imoen look fully rested and awake, despite all the wine, is that another gift from your Advanced Adventurer skill?” Jaheira asked, sipping at her tea delicately. Whatever it was was waking her up quickly, her eyes clearing as Harry watched.

Harry nodded. “When we lay down we are out in an eyeblink. We don’t even dream either, we lay down close her eyes, and then are awake eight hours later.”

“That c, c, could be dangerous,” Khalid stuttered. “If it forces you t, t, to sleep for a s, s, set amount of time you are v, v, vulnerable if there are enemies about.”

“No idea,” Harry said with a shrug. “It’s happened every day on the trail, but we’ve never slept near where enemies were, so I have no clue how it would react.”

“Then I suppose it’s a good thing myself and Khalid are not part of your Adventurers’ Party just yet. How are we for arrows,” she asked, changing the subject abruptly looking over at Khalid. “I would like to pick up some sling stones if we can. I’ve not been able to find many worthy of the use on the road, and my iron balls are all used up.”

“I’m sorry,” Imoen said brightly as she came out of the room, grinning evilly. “Did Jaheira just say that she had iron balls? And used them all up?”

“Child, it is far too early for your sense of humor right now,” Jaheira growled, shaking her head. “And you and Harry don’t have to rub in the fact that you are not feeling the effects of our late night drinking and talking please.”

Harry nodded though, interrupting the banter. “Actually, Jaheira’s got a point. How are we for provisions? And after this, I think we can dispense with a lot of our actual baggage, that should speed us up right? If you all put your bags in my item box?”

“We need bread,” Khalid answered promptly, also cutting through the ladies back and forth. It was amusing to see the two women go at one another sometimes, but it could also just be a waste of time. “W, w, we might also want to lo, lo, look around for some new weapons."

Harry instantly nodded agreement to that. “My second sword broke during that fight, and I don’t think any of us wants to be caught out in the wilds without working weapons. Speaking of, Can I see your longsword +1 Khalid?” he asked.

Khalid obliged by pulling the sword out of its scabbard, which was hanging by his chair, and Harry looked at it.

Khalid’s Bastard sword +1 +4 to Defense when wielded by Khalid. Durability: 25/100

Khalid’s favored weapon, this has seen service in his hand for three times your own lifetime. It was an early present by his superiors in the harpers and has been with Khalid through thick and thin.

Now that he was holding it and had the identify skill, Harry could make out the wear and tear on it, whistling a little. “Khalid, I think you might want to pick up another longsword too. This says that it’s durability is twenty-five out of hundred. I’ve no idea if that will equal directly to the amount of hits it can take or whatever, but since it says that, it’s obviously gone down.”

“So, so, sound thinking, but c, c, can you make out tha, tha, that kind of thing on regular sw, sw, swords?” Khalid asked.

Blinking, Harry looked down at handed back Khalid sword, and Imoen wordlessly handed her own over. He looked at it and the Warhammer he’d used last night after his longsword had broken, but they read simply as short sword and warhammer. “Doesn’t look like it, no. I think that the durability issue only comes up with either enhanced items. The others will just last as long as they will and that’s that.”

“That’s also makes some sense,” Jaheira said frowning. “After all, a Bastard sword +1 like Khalid cow costs about as much as two thousand five hundred gold to three thousand in a large city when trade is flowing. A regular weapon only costs twenty five, possibly as much as seventy depending on the type of sword it is.”

Harry nodded. “The only other time I’ve seen durability like that was on my razor back in Candlekeep, and it was a gift from Gorion.” He frowned, looking into his inventory for a moment turning away his fingers flicking around the empty air to everyone else’s eyes. “I don’t see it. Darn it, of all the things to forget.” He raised a hand to his chin and scratched it. “Razors,” he said definitively “add them to our shopping list.”

Jaheira raised an eyebrow. ‘You don’t think you’re going to grow a beard? Most human men seem to think of it as some kind of rite of passage. I’ve never understood that myself.”

“N, nor I,” Khalid said with a chuckle of his own. As a half-elf, growing a beard would have been incredibly difficult for Khalid, even if he had been so inclined.

Imoen laughed. “Well I for one approved. I don’t think a scraggly Harry would be quite as good-looking,” she said ruffling hair Harry’s hair affectionately.

Shaking her head at their antics Jaheira stood up. “In any event, we should head down and see what what supplies we can find. But you need to watch out for that Harry. We saw you doing something when you were looking through your item box. You must keep it a secret that you get so much honest utility out of that skill.”

Frowning, Harry nodded. “I suppose I shouldn’t get into the habit of showing you and Khalid then, even now that you know the secret.”

“Exactly. We want to benefit from that skill, but we do not want others to know about it.” Jaheira suddenly scrunched her brows in an honestly cute expression of confusion. “Is your item box or these quick slots you mentioned the reason why you are able to change weapons so quickly?”

“Quick slots,” Harry replied, standing upright. Between one blink and the next he was suddenly holding Imoen’s short sword and his own shield, and then again a shield and Warhammer. Then, a little slower a staff and a crossbow. He looked down at the crossbow thoughtfully and then at Khalid. “Why can druids like Jaheira use slings but not crossbows or bows?”

“Cr, crossbow and bows ar, are weapons m, meant to kill. That is, an, an, anathema to the teachings of the druids,” Khalid said instantly. “A sling, is a weapon to, de, de, defend the flock.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “That sounds like an amazing bit of justification for something that just exists, without any greet real reasoning behind it. And dare I ask about why druids can wield scimitars?”

“Because nature, like the gods themselves, are prone to whimsy,” Jaheira replied dryly, looking at her husband with amusement plain on her face. “Now if you are ready to move Khalid, I think we should be going.”

Harry and the others headed downstairs, finding the innkeeper and one of his bartenders still up already up. Bentley waved at them, looking at Jaheira and Khalid quizzically, and asking “If they needed anything.”

“Nothing but access to your stores old friend. We will of course pay,” Jaheira added, seeing his hesitance.

Bentley breathed a sigh of relief. “Good to know you aren’t going to prevail upon my hospitality to that extent my friends,” he said with a laugh. “Now come with me, and we will see what we can see.”

He led the way to the back of the main hall of the inn, where there was a locked door behind the bar there, leading them in and lighting the torches within. “Now, what do you want?”

“What do you have?” Jaheira answered quickly.

Harry was about to say that they had more than enough resources to buy anything. But remembering the haggling skill, he decided not to shoot himself in the foot. He didn’t want Bentley to gouge them after all. Instead he turned and looked at each item on the walls in turn seeing the notices everyone else could see and the ones only he could see thanks to his Gamer ability. Moving over to one side, he pulled out from a pile of slings and leather armor to find a sling made of some kind of gray material, it’s large sling sack well-made and slightly larger than normal.

Sling +2 Durability 100/100

This sling is made of elephant hide, made to be tougher and stronger. Though giving no additional bonus to range or aim this sling can add more damage to your slingshots.

+2 to damage

Jaheira stepped forward and taking it from his hand, examining it carefully as Harry subtly nodded to her. “Khalid, how much money do we have?”

“Only around a thousand and fifty gold,” Khalid replied, examining a few longswords with a mournful expression.

“Add our three thousand to that,” Harry said gesturing to himself and Imoen and speaking about the money they’d made during the tutorial dong small quests over and over.

Keeping their money separate like this was something again that would change once he earned the trust of these two: they would then combine their money into one purse for the party. But until then, their funds were still separate.

Harry found another find, a small Buckler which had a name Buckley’s Buckler. As Jaheira pulled it out, he placed his head on the shield of the same time as her, and instantly got a bit more information about it.

Buckley’s Buckler: 10/100 durability

A rectangle of mammoth hide forms this small shield. No amount of cleansing can dispel the pong of decay from this poorly tanned device, yet somehow the malodorous shield fortifies its wielder.

This shield gives +1 to Constitution but has at least two unknown negatives.

Despite the plus to constitution, Harry shook his head, gesturing to her to back away. She frowned at him, but he whispered is not worth it, “it’s only got 10 out of 100 durability, and some odd negatives I can’t make out.”

Her eyes widened, and then a small smile appeared on her face. “That AA skill of yours. That is truly going to be very helpful into the future.”

Harry grinned, and moved deeper, moving over to Khalid, who gestured at a few weapons, asking loudly for Harry to test the heft of them for his build. Most of them were simple swords, and Harry bought three of them, having them disappear into his weapons space. He also bought himself a helmet for himself and Imoen. Imoen also got an upgrade to her leather jerkin, a studded leather jerkin. His own chain mail he replaced with a chest plate and he bought.

However, he was able to find a single buckler that had a hundred durability. This, the smallest kind of shield only really protected the forearm, but it would do for Jaheira or even Imoen the thief, in close combat. He handed it over to Imoen first, who put it on her arm, then equipped her sort sword, moving through a few forms.

Imoen has started to learn the importance of Stance, Lower Body Strength, and Body Movement. These combat skills will now be treated separately from her weapons skills.

-15% chance to hit in Close combat. -15% chance to dodge. -15% chance to block.

Once mastered these skills will rejoin Imoen’s combat skills to give combat bonuses to Agility, Dexterity and Strength.

Harry blinked at the familiar message, the same one he’d gotten when he learned the same thing, and smiled inwardly appreciative that even Imoen, who could only put a single skill slot into any one weapon, could still become a little bit better with that weapon than otherwise. In fact, the combat bonus for her would probably be more noticeable than the one for him because of that.

Harry left Khalid and Imoen to it for a second, moving over to Jaheira who was examining a few sets of chain armor, and staffs near the doorway. Her own staff had come through the fight last night relatively unscathed, but the same could not be said for her armor, which had been torn. “Are any of these any different?” she asked quietly as he walked up.

Harry glanced at them, shuddering slightly as the air from the open door brought the flower and grass scent of Jaheira’s hair to him for just a second. *Gah, none of that, she’s married, it doesn’t matter if she smells of fresh grass and has elf ears. God, I need to find a girlfriend. Curse this eighteen year old body and it’s urges!*

Shaking those thoughts off, Harry took in the items she was examining. But his Gamer ability didn’t tell him anything different about any of them and he shook his head. “I don’t think so. I wanted to ask you though if you felt that the innkeeper would give us a good price on jewels?”

“That will depend on the jewel, and how many you are selling. He won’t actually be the final buyer after all, anything you sell him will have to be sold began to someone else,” Jaheira replied promptly. “There’s no jeweler working in the Friendly Arms Inn.”

“in other words, he isn’t the correct one to sold jewels too, right?” Harry asked cutting to the quick.

Jaheira rolled her eyes and nodded. “That’s correct, child.”

Harry twitched, at that. Being called child or lad always reminded him too much of Dumbledore’s ‘my boy’ and sounded way to condescending. “Okay, I’ve had enough. I’ll make you a deal Jaheira, you don’t call me child, and I won’t call you Grandmother. Deal?”

She reared back, but Harry gave her his best innocent look, which due to his eighteen-year-old body wasn’t actually all that good in comparison to what it might have been in his original form. “After all, half-elves live forever, and you’re obviously much more mature then your physical form would indicate, right?”

No woman likes to be called grandmother unless they really were one, and even then only by their actual family owners. Thus it was no surprise when, after a Willpower Check Passed, Jaheira simply nodded, “I believe we have an accord.”

Harry nodded back, but his eyes had been caught by something, a notice hovering behind several others among the shields that she had been studying.

Harry instantly began to push toward it, moving aside the items between him and the notice that had gotten his attention, and removing the notices themselves. Until he finally revealed what he had been looking for.

Tower shield +1 Durability 100/100

An extremely well made a shield, further enchanted for strength, although the weight of the tower shield is something that most adventurers would be unwilling to work with.

Harry hefted it, sliding it onto his arm, then pulled out his sword, and moving through some motions, nodding. “I’ll take it,” he said, sliding his sword back into its sheath and turning to look at the innkeeper.

the innkeeper grimaced. “I didn’t expect you to find that,” he said honestly. “It’s easily the best thing I’ve got in my in my inventory. I’ll sell it, but not for a penny less than three thousand gold.”

Harry frowned, then said, “I’ll pay two thousand in gold, and the rest in gems.”

“Depends on what kind of gems boy,” he said, shaking his head.

“Don’t call me boy.” With that, Harry pulled out a large pouch of jewels and handed them over. Inside were the lynx eye gems that he had collected during the tutorial, seventy of them, Harry having quickly transferred twenty-nine of them out of the bag and into another gem bag in his item box.

The innkeeper pulled them out, staring at one than the other, his eyes widening. “These are all fine quality gems, and they’re all cut already. Aye, you have yourself a deal, boy,” he said, spitting into his palm and holding out his hand.

Harry growled at that, and Jaheira chuckled behind him, shaking her head before hefting up a chain mail armor. Khalid’s armor had not been replaced, nor Harry’s though they had taken a lot of hits in the fight the evening before. But the armor for them both was too expensive and not better than what they were wearing by enough to interest them.

The four of them soon left the inn, with both Jaheira and Imoen armored with new chain mail, although Imoen could barely use it.

From the inn they moved down onto the road going south for a time until they broke off. They weren’t going to use the road the entire way, instead, the four of them had decided last night to see if they could find any bandits, not just for the bounties that Imoen had found first, but also because they needed see if these bandits were actually working together with the individuals behind the iron shortage, or if they were simply a symptom, not connected to the actual issue.

It was slow going for a time, both because of the distance, and because they were going overland, paralleling the road instead of on it. Harry had agreed with them in the inn that it was necessary, and still agreed with them now. Because this way they would get a chance to see his Advanced Adventurer ability in action in a smaller, less dangerous setting.

The first opportunity for this came four days after they had left the inn behind. Harry was walking along in the center of the party as usual, when he blinked, staring up into the side as his map updated showing a single red dot to one side. He frowned, then whistled in a way that Jaheira and Khalid had taught him and Imoen early on in their trek out from Candlekeep.

The others quickly closed in on him, Jaheira coming out of the wood lands as if she had been summoned there, causing Harry to shake his head. “Is that Druid thing or half-elf thing?” he asked jokingly, gesturing to her and then around at the woodlands. “How quickly you move and everything.”

“Elves are at home in the forest, yet, I was not born in one. I was born in a city and came to my powers later. Much later.”

“Oh really how much later?” Imoen teased, before Harry slapped her upside the head very light.

She had done this a time or two to him back when they were in Candlekeep, and though it’d taken them a while to get used to it, gentle head slaps like that were not a sign of anger or hate, rather they were assigned of comradery. “No, bad Imoen.”

“Why d, d, did you call u, u us back, Harry?” Khalid asked, cutting through the banter.

“My map is telling me that there is an enemy of some kind out there,” Harry reported seriously, pointing in the correct direction. “Right at the edge of my map range.”

“Hmm…I’ve been seeing spore and pawprints of wolves…How large is your map range?” Jaheira asked, musing aloud.

“It doesn’t have any indicators like that, although that could be possibly be upgraded in the future. I’d say maybe about an hour’s worth of walking in the forest, thirty minutes on the road. They are definitely out of my sight, that’s about all I can tell you for certain.”

“Which means we m, m, might well be wi, wi, within the range of a wolf’s nose. And where th, th, there is one, there will be a pack,” Khalid said, scratching at his nose thoughtfully.

“Khalid is right, but this could do for a first test of your abilities. Does your map ability tell you anything else?” Jaheira asked

Harry shook his head. “No, only that there’s an enemy out there.”

“Then let us see what we can see. We’ll move in that direction until that first dot is well into your map range, then send the pink haired one here out to scout. You believe that I am good at appearing, and it is true when we are here in the forest, but against enemies, Hide in Shadows works far better than the dual than the Druid skill of Forest Melding. Even a wolf’s nose will be defeated by that skill.” Jaheira said.

Harry nodded, looking over at Imoen. “Are you up for this?”

She just grinned at him, not even bothering to answer as she turned and started to head off in the direction Harry had indicated. Harry quickly caught up with her, and the other two as well, all of them now pulling out weapons just in case. After all, despite the map it would hardly be good for them to let their guard down. About an hour and a half later Harry stopped, as more and more red dots appeared ten in number. He looked around at the others and said, “There’s ten of them now.”

“Is there any indication that there might be more beyond your site?” Jaheira asked.

Harry frowned, staring at his map, then shaking his head. “I don’t think so. But to be certain, I’d have to try to come at the pack from another angle.”

“Let u, u, us do that,” Khalid said, clapping his hand on Harry shoulder. “Imoen ca, ca, can go forward now, and Jaheira w, w, will stay here, to mark our regr, re, regroup point.”

Harry nodded, and the two of them moved off as Imoen left heading on straight towards the wolves, causing Jaheira to sigh. Leaning back against tree, her fingers slid down it’s bark as she communed with it, savoring a few moments to herself, melding into the forest.

She opened her eyes from her meditation as she felt Khalid’s presence through the forest, and Harry’s a second later. Khalid she was used to feeling, his presence a firm, familiar presence to her expanded senses. The fact that she could already sense Harry’s as well, was somewhat surprising, mitigated by the fact that a few minutes later she felt Imoen coming towards them too.

Harry nodded to the others. “It’s just the ten of them, no other enemies in sight.”

“Excellent Harry!” Imoen said, coming out from behind him and Khalid spooking both men, causing Khalid to actually let out a squeak. “And it is just wolves, well, wolves and one Ogre. The ogres cooking some kind of meat over a fire, and the wolves are laying about it like lapdogs.”

Jaheira rolled her eyes, but did not look surprised, the forest having warned her of the thief’s presence a second before she had revealed herself. When she had compared Imoen’s skill to her own forest melding, she had not told them that she could see through it here in the forest. “Let’s get to it then.”

The four of them moved forward, and sure enough, Imoen was correct. It was a wolf pack, led by a large ogre, who seemed to have tamed the wild wolves to a certain extent.

“Do you think that’s the girdle where stealer we’re supposed to be on the lookout for?” Imoen whispered.

“Maybe,” Harry said with a nod. “In which case, this is doubly good. I think we can try a bit of what I’ve called a flanking attack here…”

Moments later, he and Khalid were gone, moving wide around the campfire, until they were to the side of it. As they settled down, Harry stared at the ogre, and a new bestiary page appeared in front of him.

An ogre is a large, brutish creature that can be found in many places around the world, or perhaps all of them save the bottom of the ocean. Ogres have just enough intelligence to be able to work with others and are more than strong enough to cow wolves or even other animals into serving them, acting like a pack alpha. They aren’t as smart as orcs or humans, and their culture, such as it is, is even more devoted to the rule of the strong than the orcs.

Attitude toward Adventurers: It depends on the time of day and if they are hungry, for you are crunchy and good with ketchup, but Ogres are lazy and prefer easy meals.

Weaknesses: Ogres are animalistic in many ways, and their defense against mind magic, or indeed being scared at all, is low, so long as other ogres are not around.

Once they were, Khalid let loose a very lifelike owl hoot, signaling Jaheira they were in position.

At that signal, Imoen and Jaheira let fly. Imoen’s arrow hit its mark, and to her eyes one of the wolves lost about half of its health bar. Jaheira’s sling stone also hit, but not the target she had been aiming at, rather another wolf directly behind that one.

The wolves yelped and howled, and the ogre stumbled to his feet, grabbing up his club and moving in their direction. But halfway to them, Harry and Khalid attacked from the side. As they did, both Imoen and Harry saw the message they had been hoping to see.

You have performed a dual attack and a flank attack! Damage increased by X 2 for all participating party members.

A longbow’s larger arrow slamming into a wolf with punishing force, sinking deep into its body and killing it instantly. Jaheira’s next sling stone hit another wolf in the head, cracking his skull open as Harry’s slower crossbow arrived, killing the wolf that Imoen had wounded.

Then Jaheira was casting. Before the wolves and ogre could react to the fact that they were being attacked from the side, Entangling Vines burst upon the wolves which had charged towards her and Imoen’s position. Khalid and Harry then raced forward from their own flanking position, moving around the entangled wolves to engage the ogre.

The ogre seems confused for a moment then roared out, ‘You’ll pay for hurting my pets! I’ll have your lives and girdles for this!”

Harry blinked, and shook his head. “Well, that confirms this is the girdle obsessed ogre. Good to know.”

Then the ogre was on him, and Harry raised his tower shield, letting the ogre’s club hammer into its face head on. This was a mistake, as Harry learned when the blow nearly lifted him off of his feet, causing him to stumble backward. He still kept the shield up between them, but his arm throbbed from the effort.

Khalid nipped in, slashing at the ogre’s back but the ogre turned, fantastically quick for something so large, it’s club flashing out in a thrust that should’ve caught Khalid in the chest. Yet Khalid dance aside, his longsword flicking, cutting not at the ogre’s main body out but at his knuckles. It was evident to Harry instantly that he was trying to wreck the ogre’s grip on his club. But it failed, the attack not cutting deep enough into the ogre’s toughened hide.

Thanks to the bestiary page Harry knew what its weaknesses were though, so instead of going for the main body, he went for one of its knees, slicing into it from behind just as the ogre turned again, to face him. When the thing tried to bring it’s club around again, Harry got into its swing with his shield, carrying the club to the side, and attacking the same knee.

Critical hit! Your strike has crippled the ogre!

Harry saw the message and instantly backed away das the club was swung again, ducking underneath it and rolling, despite his encumbering tower shield. He was then up and out of the ogre’s range, and the ogre was falling back, his one leg now unable to bear his weight.

Khalid followed suit, nodding approvingly at Harry. “S, s, sound thinking,” he said as Harry idly noted that he had won a bit more respect from Khalid. Harry nodded, then looked over as Jaheira and Imoen came out of the Woodlands around them into the fire of the ogres campsite. The wolves weren’t dead yet, but they were still heavily entangled and could be dealt with in a moment.

The two of them instantly joined Khalid and Harry in firing at the ogre, killing him within a few seconds from outside his own weapon range. One lesson Harry had never been needed to be told was that in a fight, there was no such thing as fair play. That left the entangled wolves, and Jaheira turned to Imoen. Your Blood Mage spells, do you think you can show us one?”

“Hmm, I suppose I could,” Imoen replied, then slowly an evil smile appeared on her face. “Hey, are the vines that spell conjures up flammable?”

“They are, but given how close we are to the forest, I don’t think we want to risk of fire spell,” Jaheira cautioned.

“Well then there’s always my old standby,” Imoen said, then thrust out one hand towards the pile of the entangled wolves. “*Bombarda*!”

“Imoen has cast Bombarda. This Area of Effect spell costs -20 to health,” Harry read aloud, even as the explosion hit. All four of the remaining wolves were blown apart, and Imoen’s lips quirked into a less evil smile as she looked over at Jaheira. “Well?”

She exchanged a glance with Khalid. “The explosion aspect of that spell is much more concentrated than a Fireball, but not so much as one of the higher end spells, like Explosion itself. We would have to see it’s effect against armored targets to tell you which is truly more dangerous to its immediate targets.”

“Quite go, go, good though. I think a, a, anyone who sees your levels and b, b, believes that a co, co, correct indicator of how dangerous you are go, g, going to be sadly disappointed.”

“I don’t know about that,” Harry said shaking his said. “Remember, that armored giant that killed Gorion actually got away. So he at least knows were more dangerous than our levels would indicate, although he might not have seen us actually use our Blood Mage spells.”

“True, yet setting those spells aside, I have to admit that your tactical skills are impressive. I would not have thought about flanking on such a simple target, but I did notice the extra damage that you were doing,” Jaheira said gesturing around them.

Harry grinned at that nodding and noticing that the respect between him and Jaheira had again gone up.

“And now we loot the bodies,” Imoen said mock cheerfully. Wolf pelts go for what forty gold each?”

True, and with you and Harry here, well we would be fools not to make use of your incredible item box abilities, although thanks to your demonstration we are down four possible pelts,” Jaheira mockingly reproved to which Imoen stuck out her tongue. “Come child,” she said to Imoen in response to the younger woman’s expression, a smirk appearing on her own face. “I can show you how to skin a wolf.”

Harry frowned at that and moved over. When Jaheira that him quizzically, he shrugged. “I don’t know how to skin a wolf either and I want to see if this Advanced Adventurer system of mine can do anything to make it any easier.”

“If so, I will cheerfully call it the most magnificent gift of all time. However, I am most doubtful that will be the case.”

“You never know,” Harry said with a chuckle, kneeling down next to the wolf across from the two women. Khalid also wandered over, stopping his journey towards the dead ogre, Harry simply touched the head of the wolf, running his hands through the fur. After all, beyond the wolves that attacked him that first night out with Gorion, this was the first time he’d seen one.

A moment later, the image of the animal in front of him was superimposed by a wire outline showing its fur as if it was already pulled off and laid out on top of the animal. Harry blinked, then looked over at Jaheira. “You’re going to hate me.”

Jaheira and Khalid’s eyes narrowed, and Harry very deliberately pulled with the hand that had been touching the wolf. An instant later, there was a tiny flare of blue light and the wolf was both skinned, and the wolf meat cut into different haunches.

For a moment his fellows were silent, staring at Harry, then Imoen growled. “Why, if could do something like this, did you make Khalid and me prepare that one deer he shot on our way to the Friendly Arm Inn?”

“Because I didn’t know this was a possibility!” Harry said quickly holding up his hands quickly. *Although I do wonder why I was able to do it now when I couldn’t when we were dealing with the dead bodies of the attacks back where Gorion and I were ambushed. Maybe it only works on certain animals and creatures? Or could it be tied into my identify skill?*

Jaheira’s eyes narrowed, staring from him down to the skinned wolf, while Khalid shook his head. “Can I just say, th, tha, that is very much like ch, ch, cheating?”

“Humph, regardless, this means we will let the wolves and ogres to you then.”

Harry rolled his eyes but nodded and moved around. Imoen did o wondering if, now that Harry had shown her this, if it was possible she could do the same thing. It turned out she could, and with a whoop, she moved from one wolf to another, adding them to first her own item box, then shifting it over to Harry. With the wolves taken care of, Harry moved over to examine the corpse of the ogre that they killed.

On his person, Harry found three different belts, only one of which was labeled ‘simple belt’ and was therefore left on the body. When he looked at the second it came up as Mysterious Girdle followed by a query asking if Harry wanted to identify it. The other belt read as:

‘The Elf’s Bane:

An infamous highwayman in his day, Pandar of Scardale made quite a name for himself vexing the elves of Cormanthor forest. To their annoyance he continually used the wood to escape the law; and with the aid of this girdle, the elves' arrows as well. Unfortunately for Pander, pit-traps and starvation proved a slower, but effective, substitution.

Armor Bonus: +3 VS Piercing, +3 Vs Missile

Harry nodded. “I believe that is the girdle that the surly dwarven woman wanted I think, right?” Imoen nodded, and Harry put it into his pouch. With that done, he turned his attention to the Mysterious Girdle, hitting the identify button with his eyes. The Mysterious Girdle label disappeared in a little bit of blue color, replaced by:

Mysteriously Magically Enhanced Girdle:

Although you tried to identify this Girdle, you have not come across an item like this before. It seems to have a few layers of enchantments on it, a few bonuses to mages for one, like the robes of the Seekers in Candlekeep.

You can also tell it is cursed: not in a malicious or harmful way but rather in a deliberately comedic manner, somewhat like the Tickling Charm of Imoen’s. Wearing this girdle is bound to make people laugh, and that wearer moan, not in agony, only in embarrassment. Why that is, you cannot tell.

Harry read that aloud, looking around at the others. “Any guesses?” None of them said anything, simply shrugging her shoulders in ignorance, and Harry shrugged too. “Well, I’m certainly not going to try to put it on and see what happens so unless someone else is volunteering?”

In th, tha, that case I suggest we move on. T, th, the dead bodies will no doubt bring predators. A s, s, shame really, this area is quite a nice c, c, campsite. That ogre cho, ch, chose quite well.”

Jaheira nodded agreement, and Harry and Imoen, not having any real experience with how quickly the smell of dead bodies could carry through the woods, simply shrugged their shoulders.

As they were walking away however, a thought occurred to Khalid. “You ne, ne, never said how much experience wolves and that ogre were.” While most Adventurers say the experience they got from completing quests or fighting other adventurers they didn’t see them from fighting demi-humans or animals like this.

Harry blinked, then nodded. “Sorry, I forgot afterwards. He looked at the messages which had gathered up in the corner of his eye, enlarging and getting rid of them one after another with eye flicks. “Each wolf was 25 experience, and the ogre was 125. Not enough really to matter for any of us, which is a pity.”

A sudden thought occurred to him, and he opened up his status page, calculating for a bit, then looked at Imoen’s. “Okay, something else has carried over. The experience wasn’t split before us or went only to the person who got the kill. We each get 25 and 125 experience regardless of who got the kill, so long as it was one of us rather than Jaheira and Khalid.”

The married couple grumbled good naturedly about that but didn’t care overmuch about it. Not until they could join Harry’s party fully.

About two days later they came upon something else that Harry had told them about. He read the reading aloud now for the benefit of the others. Warning, you have entered an enemy zone. An enemy zone is an area where creatures spawn at intervals and will attack anyone entering the range. These areas vary in difficulty, and can be either a source of good experience, or a good way to die prematurely. Be aware of which is which.”

Finishing reading Harry looked around at the others, then explaining a bit more of what he knew. “This is like those first skeletons we fought as a team. “The respawn area will keep on respawning a certain number of enemies.”

I, I, is there anything else about it th, th, that you can tell us?” Khalid asked, frowning and scratching at his chin. “What ty, ty, type of enemies, h, how long betw, be, between respawns? I, is th, th, there a reward for clearing it o, o, out?”

“There wasn’t a reward for killing all those skeletons before, and I can’t remember the experience they gave us, so I have no idea if it’s worth it or not,” Harry said with a shrug. “It’s probably more of the same though, skeletons or other low-level enemies. If we see a high level enemy, we can always retreat. “

“It is good to know that despite this gigantic cheat function that you have somehow been rewarded with through fate and the lechery of a dead god that you have not become arrogant,” Jaheira said caustically.

Harry looked at her, shaking his head. “That was kind of impressive actually. Should I be flattered you put that much effort into insulting me?”

“Don’t min, mind m, my wife,” Khalid said with a chuckle. “She gets into these mo, mo, moods occasionally.”

“Oh, like once a month or so?” Imoen said shrewdly. “So Elven women get that too huh?”

‘Yes,” Jaheira said irritably “yes we do. And Bentley alas had run out of the necessary herbs to counter my pains. Now, can we please find these enemies? I wish to kill something, and if I can’t find something else to vent upon, the two men in this party might enough alternative.”

Khalid blinked, then nodded rapidly, and led the way, grabbing Harry and pulling him along. “Do you have any chocolate in your item space?” he hissed, actually not stuttering for a brief second.

“No, sorry” Harry said with a shake of his head. Harry had tried to find chocolate at one point, but after getting used to the almost medieval tech level that this world had, he had realized quickly that it was either completely unknown, insanely expensive and hard to ship. Khalid was actually only the third person to have ever mentioned it to him. “I have a lot of different spices and other things; I even have some yeast from the Friendly Arm. I could try to make some kind of sweet cake for her over the fire tonight. Would that help?”

“It might, yes.”

You have earned +50 respect and +100 trust from Khalid. Good grief, apparently that time of the month is worse if you’re already a bitch.

Harry blinked, looking away from Khalid to read that and Khalid looked at him quizzically. “Did your Ad, ad, Advanced Adventurer j, just give you som, so, some information?”

“No,” Harry said hastily, “Nothing like that, ju, just an errant thought.” *Is it trying to get me killed? Or does it just really not like her for some reason?* For his part, Harry really didn’t have a problem with Jaheira except for when she was being insanely bossy. Now mind you, that was about forty-nine percent of the time. The other fifty-one percent she was actually kind of nice, and her sense of humor was an odd mix between Prof. McGonigal, and Hermione’s with a lot more sarcasm thrown in. Heck, even her bossiness sort of reminded him of his best friend at home, so he could take it far easier than Imoen could, right up until she started to really talk down to them. **That**, he hated.

The enemy zone turned out to consist of kobolds, giving Harry a new page in his beastie Harry.

Kobold:

small kangaroo like creatures, who are weaker than even goblins, Kobolds are only a threat to extremely low-level parties, or in groups of hundreds. Unfortunately, most of the time they do come in groups of hundreds, so fighting them can in fact be quite dangerous.

Favored weapons include short bows and swords. Watch out for poison. Their shamans can also be a little difficult.

“There are about thirty of the little creatures,” Imoen reported, returning after getting close enough to see the enemy under her Hide in Shadows skill.

Harry looked over at Jaheira. “How many times can you cast tangling vines?”

“Four times per day,” she replied promptly. Since she wasn’t part of his ‘party’ Harry had no access to her spells as he would if Imoen had such spells. But after a little under three weeks, she trusted Harry enough to know her spell repertoire, although she didn’t trust him enough to ask him for input on what spells she should use. “I also have two spells of Cure Poison, and four Cure Minor Wounds, two spells of Summon Animal, two spells of Hold Animal, and two spells of Cure Serious Wounds memorized for the day.”

Harry nodded, then had Imoen described the area around the 30 kobolds. “So the enemy zone’s respawn point is probably that cave behind them…” Harry said musing thoughtfully. “And how large is that rocky zone?”

“Um… about fifty yards maybe.” Imoen guessed, closing her eyes as she pictured the camp. The tunnel Harry had mentioned led into a small hill in the landscape, in front of which was an open area abutting a rocky segment of the forest, where large chunks of granite stuck of of the ground, scattering the few small trees that were attempting to take root there. At the same time, the forest grew up over the hill very slightly, but there was enough of a clear zone that anyone above the cave could see in every direction.

“We’ll circle around them up I think, let my map work out there whether or not there are any others around in the forest on the other side of the hill before we attack. But I think that Rocky area that you noticed to their east might be the best bet,” Harry said.

“Why so?” Jaheira asked, cocking her head quizzically.

“The rocks would break up any charge. We could leave you and Imoen there behind us and create a killing ground in front of them.” He looked at Khalid. “I know you prefer to use a medium shield, but with the main threat from kobolds being from their arrows, do you think you can switch to our extra tower shield?”

Khalid nodded wordlessly, and Harry pulled out the item in question, handing it over.

They did circle around the kobolds, finding no other enemies in the area bar a cougar that Jaheira sent off in an opposite direction with her druid powers. She couldn’t have dominated it entirely, not without actually using an animal friend spell, but as a Druid she did have a certain way with animals regardless. “A, and, it wasn’t a b, b, bear,” Khalid teased. “Jaheira, h, has issues with those, a, as you’ve noticed.”

Jaheira huffed but didn’t deign to reply to that, and Harry led her and Khalid around the camp and to the rocky area, leaving Imoen behind to use her thief skills to flank the enemy. But as they moved into it, they were immediately spotted by the enemy, as Harry had figured. Jaheira instantly started to cast, and Khalid and Harry stood in front of her, their shields up to protect her from any missiles that might interrupt the spell.

The spell went off, catching the kobolds as they charged forward in its vines. The little creatures didn’t seem to have any kind of immunity against the spell, and more than half of them were caught instantly, with several more bounding forward into the rocky area only to be unable to move quickly through the rocks. That left eight archers free in the distance, but Harry and the others instantly started to fire at them with their long range weapons

Soon the trio had killed the six of the kobolds still free on the other side of the vines. Then Imoen appeared in among the archers, and Jaheira hid behind Khalid and Harry lobbing her slingshots into the kobolds who had gotten into the rocky area. At the same time, Khalid and Harry moved forward to engage them in melee combat, Harry simply changing his weapons out, and Khalid dropping his longbow on the ground behind him.

As their numbers whittled down, more kobolds appeared from out of the cave, proving that it had indeed been the enemy zone. Harry scowled, as most of those moved through the tangling vines towards them. Kobold Commando came the announcement as he Harry looked at them, opening bestiary at the same time.

Kobold commandos, the more more trained better armed version kobolds. Still not very tough, except of course in numbers.

Twenty of these kobold commandos appeared to attack them, but Jaheira simply cast tangling vines again, catching many of them. The only real danger to in the fight occurred a second later as another kobold came out of the spawn point and cast a spell of his own toward them before Harry could even glimpse it’s label. Several Magic Missiles flew from it towards Harry, who took them on his shield, each hit taking a bit from his shield’s durability.

Before the Kobold Shaman thing could even get off the spell, Harry shouted, “Target the mage!” But it dodged around nimbly and was able to cast another spell towards Jaheira. A Cone of Silence struck, and Harry saw a status symbol appear above her information to one side.

‘Silenced’. Jaheira has been silenced, she will no longer be able to intone spells.

“Damn! Khalid, with me, Jaheira fall back. Imoen, fall back into the woods and circle around.” Harry shouted.

A second later, Imoen yelped as the Shaman sent a prismatic spray of colors into the woods around her. The spell didn’t do much damage, when it hit her, only taking her health down by three points. But, it did reveal her, and many of the kobold commandos turned on her. “Crap!”

Harry and Khalid charged forward, braving the area plagued by the tangling vines, racing through ignoring the still tangled kobolds within to engage the kobold commandos before they could swarm over Imoen.

She was still forced to shouted out “*Protego*!” As they circled her, their swords flashing. The defensive spell encased her in a shield, and their swords smashed into it ineffectively. Then Harry was on them, his longsword, slicing two kobolds in half with a single blow, ignoring the critical hit announcement he’d just seen as he smashed another one bodily to the ground, trampling it under him. The next second he was in among the kobold commandos around Imoen, hacking this way and that, scattering the little creatures.

He felt a few sword blows go home on his back and shield, but he ignored them, trusting to his shield and chest plate which protected and to his own high health points. A second later, Khalid was there, slicing into the side of the troublesome spell user, ending its life quickly.

Harry then looked around the battlefield, noticing instantly that all of the kobold’s marks via his map had turned yellow on his map screen. This was shown a moment later in real life as the few free of Tangling Vines fled away from them into the woods. Even those still entangled panicked, no longer trying to fight towards them, rather tossing their weapons down and running in place, tearing at the vines in a frantic effort to run.

“Finish them or not,?” he asked Khalid, glancing over to where Imoen was breathing a sigh of relief and releasing her Protego spell.

“What kind of exp, ex, experience points have they g, gi, given us?” Khalid asked, showing a bloodthirsty side of him Harry hadn’t seen before.

Harry frowned at that, realizing that indeed, adventurers didn’t seem to see the other races as real unless they could communicate. He looked through his built up messages, and replied, “Not much, seven experience points for the normal kobolds, 35 for the commandos. And… huh, only 65 for the shaman.”

“Th, then don’t bother.” Khalid said, as Jaheira came out from the woods behind him, having circled back and around the fight as Harry had ordered, though she would never have admitted to having so followed his ‘suggestions’ like that.

“So,” Harry said thoughtfully looking around them. “What have we learned?”

“Kobolds don’t make for good experience points. Not worth the hit points it took to take them out,” Imoen grumbled. “At least not to me with my damn thief type’s crappy health level.”

Harry chuckled, ruffling her hair affectionately, to which she pushed him hard enough to nearly topple them over, growling at him. “Just you wait, just you wait until I can dual class, then I’ll show you.”

Nodding, Harry turned his attention to something else which had bothered him from the moment the fight started. “Are they all like that? All of the demi-human races I mean, so mindless and aggressive?”

“Not all, no. Ko, kobolds yes most of th, them are. Goblins yes, o, o, ogres and ogrillions. Half orcs are no, no, not. Orcs can be di, di, different too, although their morality is very diff, diff, different from most of sen, sen, sentient races. They sometimes m, m, make excellent mercenary g, g, groups. Their society is b, b, built upon the idea of survival of the fi, fi, fittest, and rule of the strong. They l, l, loathe book learning outside of m, m, mage craft, and e, e, even their shamans are not ex, ex, exactly held in high regard, merely f, f, fear. Fear is enough for them t, t, though.”

“Does it bother you?” Jaheira asked, after Khalid finished speaking to which Harry nodded, looking uncomfortable. She smiled at that, touching Harry’s shoulder gently as Khalid smiled. “You’re not the first to worry about the morality of offensive actions such as this,” she said gesturing to the dead kobolds are all around them. “If we could coexist with them, many adventurers would be willing to give it a chance. But the kobolds and the other sub-human races have to be willing to meet us halfway, and in the main that they are not willing to do so. I am not going to tell you to not let it bother you, but do not let it stop you from protecting yourself against them. The only effectiveness a bleeding heart can do is by bleeding himself yes?

Harry chuckled at that, nodding his head. Message received ma’am.

She twitched at that, then laughed, shaking her head.

Congratulations, your beliefs and morals have effected your relationship status with those around you positively.

You have learned +20 respect +20 trust with Jaheira.

+10 trust, +10 respect from Khalid.

You have earned +100 respect relationship points with Imoen. Your relationship status with Imoen remains ‘Family’ but remember there are varying degrees of closeness to that term.

*All right,* Harry thought. *On the one hand that’s nice to know, but on the other hand I’m not thinking like this for the damn points!*

“S, s, still, it was somewhat in, in, interesting” Khalid said looking around. “But y, y, you are saying if we sta, st, stay here for a certain amount of t, t, time, that we would find these kobolds somehow re, re, respawned?”

“That’s what my Advanced Adventurers system is implying,” Harry replied with a nod.

“I have heard of something that might explain this phenomenon,” Jaheira said thoughtfully. “Chaotic mana. Magic from the earth itself has come to the surface here, and Ao decided to put it to use, creating these nodes to continually challenge adventurers, give them a leg up as it were before they can take on tougher of opponents.”

“Well, with this as a clue to go with those skeletons, I believe I can emphatically state state that any enemy zone will only contain low level enemies. They could be useful if we were willing to take the time to sit here for months and kill them, but I would feel it incredibly bad about doing so, and it would be a horrible use of our time.”

“Agreed Harry,” Khalid, Jaheira and Imoen all said as one.

Harry went on. “I vote that in the future, while we need to be aware of these enemy zones, we don’t actually need to go out of our way to search for them unless they are connected to an actual job that were already on. Agreed?”

All three of the others again replied in the affirmative before the group split up, Imoen and Harry using his AA skill to easily search the bodies.

They pulled out arrows of fire arrows, adding around thirty two of them to Harry’s item box, each of the kobold commandos having had at least two of them on their person, which Khalid was happy to see. But beyond that there were only a few bits of gold and others things, and Imoen scowled. “Damn, even when it comes to loot, enemy zones didn’t seem to be worth it.”

“D, did you see an e, en, enemy zone or anything of that n, na, nature that night with Gorion?” Khalid asked, frowning as he brought up the topic.

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. “And it was obvious that those adventurers wouldn’t respawn either. I think Jaheira’s right, enemy zones are only to give low level experience. We have to use other means to level up like everyone else.”

In contrast to his AA skill’s ability to notice enemy zones, the map was an ability that the two experienced adventurers were coming quickly to see as being worth Harry’s weight in gold. This was proven the evening next, when they were setting up camp. The map was clear, but as they were turning in for the night, Harry’s eyes widened as he saw message he never had before.

Warning, there are enemies about. Do you still wish to attempt to go to sleep?

Harry instantly sat up, the action dispelling the message.

From where she had been about to lay down. Imoen looked at him, quizzically. They had seen before this that she had to wait at least a second to go to sleep before Harry to take advantage of the benefits of Harry’s Gamer skill. “What is it?”

“Um, the Gamer Skill just warned me that there are enemies about.”

Pushing out of the tent he found Jaheira on watch, with Khalid next to her, asleep in a blanket beside the fire instead of in the tent.

The sight was kind of touching, but they both woke up instantly as the two youngsters came out of their tent. “What is it?” Jaheira asked frowning and coming to her feet, her eyes scanning the woods around them.

Harry explained to them what had happened, then asked, “You’re the expert on woodcraft, is there any anyway you could tell which direction these enemies might be in?”

“Yes,” Jaheira said instantly, turning slightly and pointing. “That way. It’s the way to the road, about…” she frowned thinking remembering where they had last seen it and triangulating their position and their speed of movement through the forest with all the expert knowledge of a Druid and experienced adventurer. “About, I want to say ten minutes sprinting in clear day. At night, more than two hours, possibly as much as three depending on the density of the forest.”

Harry whistled, shaking his head. “They have to be just outside of my map range then.” They had estimated it by separating into groups, and Harry’s map was a 360° field of around an hour’s quick jog during the day in the woods.

Harry looked over at Imoen who nodded. “Let’s go,” she said, “I don’t think we want to try to rest here just yet, do you?”

Khalid and Jaheira both scoffed at that one, readying their weapons wordlessly.

It was full dark now and pushing through the forest like this was hard going, especially for Harry and Imoen who did not have the night vision their Elvish side gave the half-elves. But each of them took the youngsters by the hand, Jaheira taking Imoen by the wrist, and Harry being led by a hand on his shoulder by Khalid, through the pitch darkness of the forest.

Not for the second or even fifth time as they moved Harry was struck by the wild nature of the forest. It wasn’t so impenetrable, so **alien**, during the day with Jaheira and her druid craft. You could almost forget how ancient the forest was even here, this tiny splinter of the greater forest to the east. But now it came crashing back on him, making him almost nervous, twitching this way and that at odd sounds in the night. He saw Imoen was similarly affected, her green dot pulsing to yellow and back on his map, though she herself was nearly invisible to him through the forest.

When they started to see fires in the distance through the trees it was almost a relief. That relief did not last however, when they came close enough to stare through the darkness of the forest to what was causing that fire.

Because what was causing it, was a burning caravan. Several large carts were on fire, and bodies were strewn here and there, barely visible in the backdrop of the flames. Standing over them, Harry could now make out at least 12 bandits. They looked human-sized, but that was about all he could tell from this distance.

Thinking quickly, Harry pulled out his crossbow, and used its aiming function to heighten his eyes. That allowed him to see the marker over the bandits, actually getting a bestiary page for them as he did.

Bandits:

Human-shaped trash which plague the land wherever you go, they are one of the non-adventurer combat types that humanlike beings can become. Do not let their apparent humanity fool you. Bandits can be as inhuman to their victims as any orc or kobold. A kobold would kill you quickly for what you’re wearing, a bandit would rape you, then sell your dead corpse for gold.

Harry whispered “bandits,” to the others, who all nodded grimly, Imoen having already assumed it was something of that nature. He looked at Khalid and Jaheira. “Can you both describe the area to me?”

Khalid quickly did so, having come to trust Harry’s tactical sense, even if he didn’t quite have a grasp of the true utility of that skill yet.

While her husband did so Jaheira stayed silent, moving to one side and crouching down next to Imoen where she had left her a second ago. “We’re obviously going to attack them, just so you know,” she whispered sarcastically. “So much for the idea of picking our battles thanks to Harry’s mapping ability.”

But there was a hard edge to her voice where there was normally just a regular prickly edge, and Imoen nodded grimly. She too could make out the bodies lying on the ground out there, and as a former Auror, she was even more determined not to let these scum walk away than the others. She quickly pulled out her short bow, then scowled realizing that in the dark, she would only be aiming at silhouettes. Even with the bow in hand she couldn’t make out the regular red dot, although she too could see the labels above the bandits now.

Jaheira chuckled as Imoen whispered that aloud. “Nice to know that there are some things that even Harry’s overpowered Advanced Adventurer skill won’t help. I however can see them perfectly,” she finished, fitting a sling stone into her sling but not twirling it just yet.

*We can tell their numbers, but we can’t tell anything about their strengths, armor or anything like that,* Harry thought, scowling. Ironically, without the fires Khalid and Jaheira would have been able to make out how the bandits were armed and suchlike, but the fires defeated their night vision. They could make out features occasionally, and thanks to their Elven heritage again could hear the course voices of humans and could occasionally make out flashes of leather armor but they couldn’t make out more than that.

Still, that was enough for Harry. “Here’s what we’re going to do,” he said gesturing the others to huddle up. “I think it’s time that Imoen and I start using the Blood Mage spells in earnest. We’ll split up again, come at them from two sides, one from here the forest side, the other from down the road a ways. The ones coming from the forest will grab their attention, then we’ll flank them.

“Like we did against the ogre, sound thinking,” Jaheira said with a nod. “Although you are getting a little too enamored of this whole split and attack from two angles concept. Against an enemy that can think and react, it might not work.”

“But th, th, these aren’t thinking or r, r, reacting people right now,” Khalid said shaking his said. “Y, y, you saw them drinking just a, a, as well as I did love.”

“True, I just wished our omnipresent authority figure here to be aware of the danger of falling into having a favorite tactic, when others might work just as well.”

“If you cast Tangling Vines, straight where that mean fire is, is it far enough away for you to do so without fear of causing of forest fire?”

“I would have no fear on that score anyway, given the rain last night,” Jaheira said tartly. “I’ll warn you though that bandits are far less likely to be caught. Unlike skeletons and kobolds they will reacted like that group we fought at the friendly arm Inn.”

“I’m not,” Harry said grimly. “Trust me, I know this’ll be tough.”

With a limited plan in place, the group moved in quickly, getting to their prepared positions. When they did, Imoen came out of Hide in Shadows, and tossed the first spell and only spell she would be using in this fight, straight into the center of the largest fire. “Bombarda!”

Imoen has used Bombarda, the explosion-like Blood Mage spell. -30 to Health.

A bare second after Harry and Imoen saw that note the fire exploded in all directions, catching the attention of every bandit there. Three of them were hurled aside, one of them dying having been too close to the fire blasted sideways so much by the explosion he was slammed into a burning cart, snapping his neck. The others were merely singed, having been moving around the caravan’s carts. Now they tried to race towards Imoen as she disappeared again into Hide in Shadows, the skill coming back into play easily thanks to how dark it was beyond the fires.

This put them out in the open, and Jaheira struck next, conjuring up Tangling Vines. Instantly as the spell head it began to catch fire from the fires in the carts and the scattered bits of burning debris.

A few of the bandits were caught, but what the spell did most was slow them down and force the bandits to split their attention. “Fuck, are we dealing with two spell-users!?” shouted one of them, turning to the woods and barking out commands to two more, only to have them ignored.

All of this activity had three bandits who hadn’t been drinking and who were still free of the Tangling Vines. They instantly moved toward Imoen’s last position, shouting out to one another. “Keep close!”

“Be ready to dodge when the thief shows up again!”

“Right, it’s gotta be a thief, did you see how the bastard disappeared like that!”

Harry then burst out of the woods, running hard for ten paces, and before they could turn towards him, he was in among them. His sword’s tip drove into the back of one.

Harry has used backstab! Critical hit!

A second later his tower shield slammed into the center of the other man, and the ubiquitous ‘you have attempted to shield bash, shield bashes an advanced warrior skill, you do not know shield bash’ appeared in his vision, before he blinked it away. Still, the blow had, if not knocked the man backwards, at least staggered him slightly, allowing Harry to twist around, crippling the next one with a blow to the side of the knee.

By that point, the other man had brought his own sword up, and stabbed forward hard, trying to catch Harry in his side.

The blow hit unfortunately riding up the side of his armor, the point of the short sword slicing into his leather undershirt and into his side aiming for his armpit.

“Guhhh,” Harry groaned in pain, but he had already been backing away from the blow before it landed, and only the tip caught him, entering into his side a bit further down rather than up into the upper armpit. He turned, blood dripping down his side. as the sword was quickly pulled back out of his wound. Now the bandit came in again, and Harry had to defend himself quickly, pushing past the pain.

Elsewhere, the remaining eight bandits who had found themselves in the quickly expanding fire zone of the clinging vines where not having fun. Two of them had been caught by the spell, and a third faltered as he tried to get to his feet. The rest were able to break free, until one of them was caught right at the edge. As those men started to scream in suddenly sober fear of the fire crawling over the vines reached them, Imoen attacked from one side, and Khalid and Jaheira came out of the wood from the other.

You have attempted a flanking maneuver. flanking maneuver has succeeded! X2 to damage for all participants.

With the damage multiplied, two of the remaining bandits were down by sling stone and arrows before Khalid was in among the others, his sword flashing out. He landed a crippling attack of his own, cutting a leg out from under one bandit, while Harry was still dueling with the one remaining bandit who hadn’t been drunk. That dual ended, as the man’s sword smashed into Harry’s shield, and Harry used a trick Khalid had taught him which his Gamer skill hadn’t told him about. His sword came up in an arc not to hit the man, but to catch the man’s wrist before he could pull his sword back.

The man’s sword and hand went flying, and as he stumbled back with a scream, Harry thrust forward ending his life, without further preamble. He ran towards the others and grinned as through the pain of his wound as another flank attack announcement appeared, making for a total of X4 times damage.

Now attacked from three sides, with two of those sides containing long range fighter who were willing to shoot then move backwards, the the bandits were never able to coordinate and died to a man in the next few minutes. Ironically, the ones who survived the longest were the ones who were still within the fiery area of the tangling vines spell. It turned out that the fires didn’t spread as fast as they had wanted thanks to the rain that afternoon. Only one of them had died thanks to the fire crawling up the vines before Harry and the others had finished off the bandits who had gotten out of the area effected by the spell. The last two bandits were shot down from a distance, and finally, the sound of battle receded, leaving only the sound of the fires crackling to drown out the night noises of the forest.

When the last bandit fell, Jaheira instantly moved towards Harry, shaking her head as she began to move her hands and fingers in an intricate pattern. “A well thought plan I believe, but next time perhaps you could not get yourself injured in the doing?”

Jaheira Has used Cure Minor Wounds, +10 to the target’s health.

Harry was the most injured among them. One of the bandits had gotten off a shot towards Jaheira, but her buckler had interposed itself to catch the arrow on its face despite being so small thanks to her own ability in weapon and shield techniques. Khalid had taken a light grazing to one thigh and another to his side, but his armor had turned both, despite the fact that his shield had been held out of position by another bandit before that bandit had fallen to an arrow from Imoen.

Sighing faintly as the wound in his armpit closed up Harry nodded. “Agreed, I turned around too much to deal with the second one of them, I need t remember to keep my eye on the fight as a whole. Regardless, I think we should move away from here for a bit.”

“We’ll want to at the very least take their scalps now,” Khalid said professionally. “It’ll be easier because of your ability so shouldn’t take long.”

Harry shrugged, and moved over to one of the bandits, the man’s hair coming away in his grip a second later as he looted the body. “By the way did you see that one message when I began my attack?” Harry said looking over at Imoen

“Yes I did, Imoen,” said with a laugh. “It’s proven, you can use backstab.”

“So, n, n, not only can you loot a bandit of h, h, his hair by simply touching them, but you c, c, can also share different techniques, at l, l, least some of them anyway. That is ch, ch, cheating, that is,” Khalid said with a chuckle shaking his head.

As he moved from one body to another, Harry asked, “How close to Beregost do you think we are?” More to keep his mind on other things other than what he was doing than an actual desire to know.

Turning away from Imoen who had just been healed by another one of her spells Jaheira thought for a moment, looking around and pursing her lips thoughtfully, her eyes lighting on a banded rock set a few feet down the road, recognizing it as a feature she had seen before. “I believe we are about four more days away. If we go overland any rate. If we go by the road rather than paralleling it, that cuts it down to two days, since this area of the forest isn’t nearly as dense as the area we’ve been moving through.”.

Looking up from the task which should have been grisly but thankfully wasn’t thanks to his ability, he looked at Khalid and Jaheira. “I think we’re done with checking out all of my abilities. Unless you two have anything else you want to test?”

The two more experienced adventurers nodded, and Harry went on, not noticing how Imoen smiled as he once more took charge, showing his leadership ability. *And his Leadership skill,* she thought with a wry smile. *This marks the third plan he’s made that worked darn well. I wonder if his leadership have gone up, or his tactics?*

Later that night she would ask him about that, but Harry would reply with a shake of his head. Tactics was upgraded via combat and solely via combat. Leadership was something else entirely. But his Tactics skill hadn’t updated at all either, despite him coming up with good plans for them all. Harry figured this was because Imoen was his only other party member. Khalid and Jaheira were merely traveling with them.

Now Harry went on, pointing down the road to the north. “In that case, I vote we backtrack a little bit, find an area of the roads to camp out on or near to, then come back here tomorrow morning to see what we can salvage from these carts. Then we push on, and I don’t know about you, but I think we should push on hard, not stopping so long as were on the road. That’s possible right?”

“It is, with your mapping ability to warn of enemy threats,” Jaheira said nodding approvingly.

Congratulations. You have earned +10 respect with Jaheira. Sometimes good decisions are their own rewards.

Harry blinked, nodding at her, but not commenting on the relationship change as he had decided early on to keep most of that aspect a secret. It looks as if the longer we interact, the easier it is to gain her respect and trust. Trust was slower building than respect, but Harry could live with that. He was just grateful to see the change, since he figured that Khalid wouldn’t want to join his ‘party’ via his AA skill without Jaheira.

A few minutes later, Harry led the way north along the road. Khalid and Jaheira soon spotted a small out of the way culvert where they could create a campfire and hide themselves away. After a full day’s worth of travel, and a fight at the end all of them elected to go to sleep, trusting Harry’s ability to notice enemies were about for the first time.

Early the next day, Harry woke the others with a good breakfast, already prepared, and Khalid shook his head when he saw Harry had made them some fresh bread somehow, using a flat rock and his special utensils. “S, s spoiling us a, a, are you?” He asked, chuckling a little. He did however notice that both Imoen and Harry looked far more rested then they should have after only five hours sleep. *Another benefit to his AA skill?*

Harry shrugged, then gestured down the road. “I figure that a light meal like this is probably the best thing, when we’re about to deal with what was left over last night. No meats for certain.” He paused, then went on in a somewhat lighter tone. “And that thing Bentley called Traveler’s Bread is a travesty.”

The others all nodded grim agreement to both Harry’s statements. But despite his moment of levity, conversation petered out slowly, none of them looking forward to this duty.

Soon they were on their way to the battlefield of the night before. Thankfully a few of the bandits bodies had been dragged off by it wild animals, and the fires had died out dramatically, which made searching the caravan simpler.

“I d, d, don’t suppose you have a spell t, t, that could make digging holes eas, ea, easier?” Khalid asked looking over at Imoen.

Imoen frowned, then nodded slowly. “Well I could use Bombarda, although I don’t know how often I would have to in order to dig even one grave. And with the number of dead guards, merchants and bandits…”

“We won’t be burying Imoen the bandits,” said Jaheira’s sharply. “We will pile them up and burn them like the scum they are. That is what everyone does with the scum.”

Harry nodded, grateful for the hatred towards bandits she and Khalid were both showing, if much more subtly for Khalid. It was much better than the seeming apathy they had all felt after the battle against the kobolds. It made having killed the bandits seem somehow more righteous than the fight with Khalid.

Once their bodies had been searched, the bandits were piled up into a large heap, whereupon all of the remaining alcohol was poured over their bodies, and Imoen set them up on fire with an *Incendio* at Jaheira’s request. The druid still wanted to see more Blood Mage spells in action to get an idea of their abilities.

Later, while Harry and Khalid were busy digging the graves, and Jaheira frowned, looking at the items they had found. “Several letters to loved ones, most of them romantic in nature,” she reported sadly, though she also looked relieved something her next words explained. “No fathers or sons among them. I always find that kind the worst to bear, sons especially. No parent should outlive their child.”

Harry nodded understanding, then looked at the ring Imoen had just dropped in front of him as Harry was hip deep in one of the graves. Hitting yes to the routine identify question, he blinked as he actually got a full response instead of the partial one he’d been expecting.

Prince’s ring, armor level +1.

This ring despite its overbearing name, is actually quite ubiquitous across the land of Faerun. It is able to heighten the armor level of the wearer. Similar rings can be found in numerous places, although a few have other powers.

Armor level +1.

“Now that’s an interesting find,” he said, before telling the others of what it was. He looked between Jaheira and Imoen, considering, then tossed the ring to Imoen. “There you go. With your inability to wear better armor, that kind of thing is best suited for you, I think.”

Jaheira and Khalid both nodded, while Harry idly noted he had again won some trust with both ladies. Imoen put the ring on her hand, admiring it for a moment, then laughed. “That’s great and all, but I hope that when you finally get a girlfriend, you don’t give them gifts like that! Rule number one for all girls: we like jewelry and any gift of such should be somehow special.”

Even Jaheira nodded at that one, a faint smile on her face as she winked at Khalid, who rolled his eyes at some old joke between them.

“So, all in favor of racing on to Beregost the instant we’re done here?” Harry asked, shaking his head at the married couple’s antics.

Khalid and Imoen instantly raised their hands, but Jaheira shook her head, gesturing over towards the bodies. “I certainly agree with that, but before we bury these four fellows, there’s something we must see.”

Harry frowned, as his identify skill went off as he looked at one of the bodies. “That’s very weird,” He said aloud

‘What?” Imoen asked.

“Well, most of these bodies I don’t get anything via my observation ability, they are just, you know, corpses. “But this one, he’s dead, but I can still see an actual name over him.”

“He co, co, could be important in some fash, fashi, fashion, or perhaps linked to a q, q, quest. See if there i, i, is anything upon his per, per, person that could identify him,” Khalid said.

Given what adventurers sometimes did for quests that made some sense, and Harry nodded, moving over to the body. Unlike with the bandits, or the wolves, or the kobolds though, Harry had to physically search this man, and he wondered idly why that was, but shook it off as unimportant for now. He eventually found a series of letters, to and from the man, whose name was ‘Entar Silvershield Junior’, and held them up to the others. “Will that be enough you think?”

“I imagine so yes,” Jaheira nodded. Harry nodded back and the group went back to burying the bodies.

“Is there anything we need to say over them?” Harry asked about two hours later. The sun was high in the sky at this point, so he estimated it was a little past noon. They needed to get going if they were going to put any real distance under their feet today, but they still could make time for this.

“There would be, if any of us were priests. But a druid is not a priest, rather a servant of nature Harry, although some of our skills may overlap. As it is, all we can do is make markers for the grave and carry what remains of their goods and personal effects to Beregost. That is all.” Jaheira reached out and took Harry’s shoulder, squeezing lightly. “Yet it speaks well of you Harry that you worry not only about the state of their bodies but the states of their souls. Not even most Paladins would be so concerned.”

You have won +100 respect with Jaheira. It would appear she does have a soul and approves of the fact you have one too.

Shaking his head to get rid of the message, Harry nodded to Jaheira, wondering again if the Gamer skill was trying to get him killed or just really didn’t like her. Soon they all began to make up little markers and writing down descriptions of the individua. Slain by bandits was the epitaph for all of them, slain by bandits and were avenged on this day.

It worked too, although they wouldn’t know it until they passed by this way again. None of these men or women would rise as restless dead. That was a victory in and of itself.

However, burying the bodies had taken so long, and exhausted Imoen so much – her constitution was very low at five - that Harry decided both that she needed more stamina points the next time she leveled up, and that they could take a day’s rest. They marched down the road about ten miles before the sun started to go down, finding a nice campsite to use that night soon after.

The feeling around the campfire was sober, all of them lost in their own thoughts, as they eat the extremely good fair which Harry had created for them: a kind of minestrone soup, to go with the bread from this morning. And with the food, it was Khalid who broke the silence.

“I m, m, must say Harry, of all of your o, oth, other skills, I think that the most important and use, us, useful one so far is your ab, ab, ability to cook,” Khalid said with a chuckle, patting his stomach happily.

“I’m trying to work out if I should be insulted or flattered by that,” Harry said with a laugh.

“You co, co, could be both,” the other warrior replied with a chuckle.

After that, the air around the campfire turned a little more convivial, but there was no real chatter as they started to make preparations to head to bed. Even with Harry’s map, it was decided that with bandits in the area, they would have to post to guard. Harry volunteered to take first watch, followed by Imoen, then Jaheira and Khalid.

The others were just about to head into their tents when Harry called out, ‘Hold on someone just entered my map range.”

“Someone?” Jaheira asked. “Not an enemy?”

“Blue neutral, that means he’s a civilian.”

“That’s odd, but… a lone civilian?”

“Yes,” Harry said with a nod, his eyes widening as he saw how fast the blue dot was approaching them. “And he’s going like blazes!”

The two half-elves came out of their tents at that, and Imoen followed from her and Harry’s. They stood, watching to the north as the man came towards them, rushing so fast he was leaving a dust wake behind him visible even in the failing light.

He was moving so fast Harry whistled. “Is that some kind of spell?”

“An enchant, t, enchantment,” Khalid said nodding. “They are called b, b, boots of quickness or something like that. Ex, ex, extremely expensive, they go f, f, for around two thousand g, g, gold, for a pair t, t, that has been used and is o, o on its last legs. The en, en, enchantment doesn’t wear out of course, b, b, but the boots themselves do.”

By the time Khalid finished his explanation the man was close enough for Harry to identify.

A messenger.

A civilian who is tasked with rushing messages to and for, this individual is worth far more trouble than he’s worth to attack as every barely sentient individual knows. when he dies, where he dies becomes known to the authorities who sent him out. Since those authorities tend to be powerful, this often does not end well for the individuals involved.

“Interesting use of magic,” Imoen murmured, staring at the same message.

“Make way, make way!” the messenger shouted as he came on them. “Must dash to Beregost I must! Governor Kelddath must be told of the extra troops being sent his way. Beregost is to be garrisoned in case of Amnian attack. Though Amn has denied such intent. Of course they would deny it the snakes. Make way for the messenger!” the man shouted, all in one breath before he was past them.

“W, w, well,” Khalid said thoughtfully, “That was in, in, interesting. So h, he, he’s not only serving as messenger but Cryer a, a, as well.”

“Baldur’s Gate must want everyone to know that there sending troops south. As if we needed another reminder,” Harry said, having ignored Khalid’s pronouncement to stare at the announcement from his AA skill. “The Iron Intake Issue just got another little bit of information. Rising tensions. Nothing new there either.”

Jaheira nodded. “The iron ore itself is not the goal, the tensions between the two parties seem to either be the goal, or a side effect. Could someone be trying to use this to start a war?”

No one answered her question, and with that sober thought, all four of them fell silent before Harry told the others to get some sleep. They would be pushing on to Beregost without pause starting tomorrow.

**OOOOOOO**

“And this is where the school intersects the local wizards quarter. It also has a point of intersection with Paris to the east down the main street. I have been told you have parents out there waiting for you. They will be coming through that entrance over there,” the older, blonde said pointing to a gateway to the south. “The parents of prospective students are given a tour of our government building before they are allowed onto the campus itself.”

The older girl was gorgeous, Hermione had been able to acknowledge that within a minute of meeting her. She had long, amazingly lustrous platinum blonde hair down to the middle of her back, let loose at present, long legs, and even curves which, at fourteen, were just becoming clear to see. Her face was clear of blemish, angular, with just a bare hint of baby fat on high cheekbones, a small pert nose, deep blue eyes, a petite mouth marked by the tiniest hint of pink lipstick. She had also been relatively welcoming and kind to Hermione after being introduced to her in the Headmistress’s office.

“I, I’m of two minds about this,” Hermione said, almost frowning as she looked around. “It’s a lovely campus, and I have greatly enjoyed the tour, but a giant school, with so much free land, smack dab in one of the biggest, busiest cities in the world? It smacks of hubris. A single series of alleys is one thing, but this? Especially… well, I don’t know what you have heard about muggle technology but it’s advancing very quickly, and it might, eventually…”

“You’re not the only one to worry about such things,” the tall blonde young woman said from next to her. “Many non-magical born who come to our school worry about that kind of thing these days. I believe that is why the headmistress has started to push for our moving to another location. We are simply waiting for the new buildings to be built up. I understand there was also supposed to be some kind of large tournament or some such the year the new campus is supposed to be finished. But I believe it has been canceled recently, your old school, Hogwarts, pulled out of it.”

Hermione shrugged ignorance of that, looking from the older student towards the gate, then back around the school. “I have to thank you for showing me around, I realized that it was part of your duties as an upperclassman, but I presume you also have other things you could be doing.”

“That is true I do,” the French girl said without any attempt at prevarication. “However, it has not been nearly as onerous as you might think. Your questions were direct, intelligent, and your French has improved as we’ve been speaking. You are quite quick with languages. I wizh I waz” she, finished in English, her accent coming through very clearly. “I cannot get zome of zhe sound juzt right.”

Hermione almost shuddered as that accent washed over her, shaking her head. Something about that accident did **weird** things to her. “I, ahem, I rather think the boys in the world would prefer you to keep that accent honestly, Fleur.” she said with a quick, forced laugh.

Fleur, for that was the girls name, laughed too. “I do not think I need an a’cent,” she said switching to English for that last word before going on in French again” to attract the boys. It is alas all too easy for me. So easy I attract them even when I do not want to.”

Following her gaze Hermione saw her glaring to where a few upperclassmen, students older than Fleur, had been practicing dueling a moment ago under a few trees set to one side of the main thoroughfare that lead between the front yard of the school. Hermione stared at the two older students as they glared back. But not at her as she at first thought Hermione suddenly realized, but Fleur. A second alter they noticed Fleur and Hermione staring back at them, they looked away.

“And I thought it was me,” Hermione said to herself.

Fleur blinked, looking down at her. “I’m sorry, what?”

Hermione didn’t reply directly, looking away. “Attracting boys to you. Is that why many of the girls here seem to want to glare at you half the time?”

One well-manicured eyebrow rising in surprise Fleur nodded, raising her estimate of Hermione’s intelligence another notch. “You noticed that?”

“At first, I thought it was me, and I would have to deal with non-magical bias again like in Hogwarts. But I just realized that it was actually you they were glaring at.”

Fleur nodded. “I have heard that there is this issue of the blood in England. We have it too, but Madame Maxime has put a stop to much of it in the school, all that she can find anyway. If you insult another student through racist language, you either face him or her in the dueling ring, or if the offended are in their first or second year such as you, they face Madame Maxime herself. She is not quick,” Fleur said judiciously, “and her magical strength is only a little above par, but she is very dangerous nonetheless.”

After meeting school’s headmistress, Hermione could well believe it. She was easily the largest woman Hermione had ever met or even seen. Indeed Hermione could state she was a large as Hagrid and had idly wondered if she was so large for the same reason too: having a giant for a parent.

But that didn’t mean she was willing to let Madame Maxime do Hermione’s fighting for her. “I wouldn’t want Madame Maxime to be put out on my behalf, I’ll do my own dirty work thank you. My father’s taught me how to punch, and my friend Harry, well he told me to stand up for myself more a time or two,” she said, suddenly looking a lot smaller than she normally did as she thought of her missing friend.

After they became friends Harry had always told her to be herself, and to stand up for herself more than once when he saw Draco or some other students trying to make fun of her. He’d even told Ron more than once to stop taking advantage of Hermione to do his homework! That, and the whole saving her from a troll thing, was why she knew he had been a friend to treasure.

Fleur decided she didn’t like that depressed, sad look on the little girl*. She has such spirit it would be a travesty to have such be beaten down*. “Who is this Harry you speak of, was he a boyfriend that you had to leave behind?” she asked, adding a deliberate note of humor into her voice.

“Oh, no,” Hermione said with a laugh. She frowned thinking. “I… I suppose it could’ve gone that way eventually, but…” she looked around, then gestured Fleur to walk with her towards the gate to the school, and out into the streets beyond where she would meet her parents. “Have you heard about the disappearance of the Boy Who Lived?”

“Of course. I have mentioned my papa is the Advisor for Judicial Affairs, have I not? As such he is in touch with what you call Aurors in England and knows all about it…” Fleur slowly stopped speaking, looking at Hermione with even more interest than before. “You knew him, I take it?”

“Yes, he was my best friend. Frankly looking back on it, I think he was my only real friend. My other so-called friend stopped actually contacting me, when I started to refuse to help him to do his summer schoolwork.” When Fleur’s eyebrow rose once more in query Hermione shrugged. “I don’t think he was using me for it entirely, but I definitely think that our friendship was started because we were both friends with Harry. If he wants to reach out and keep our friendship going, he has to do some of the work, and I don’t mean just his schoolwork,” she said ferociously to herself, muttering about idiot redheads.

This caused Fleur to laugh. The girl indeed had spirit and intelligence too. She approved. Then she thought of something. “I’ve been meaning to ask, why are you only taking part-time classes. While we certainly offer them, most of the time those we do offer them to our people who have to work for a living as well. Surely your family is not so badly off?”

“Oh, no!”, Hermione said with a laugh. “My parents are actually quite well-to-do. There both dentists you see.”

Flares Fleurs eyes widened at that. “Those are the non-magical to work with teeth, yes? You truly must introduce me to them. I would love to get my teeth looked at by such experts.”

*And here’s hoping her father has some of this one’s defenses against my Aura.* Fleur’s mother was a Veela, which made Fleur a Veela too, and she had hit puberty last year, which had caused a lot of upheaval in her social life. This morning she had accidentally released it entirely when a most bothersome boy had decided to accost her, when she was actually running late to meet young Hermione in Madame Maxime’s office. She had still had her Aura at full strength when she entered the room, and Hermione had reacted by blushing, flushing, and looking away until she got it under control with a speed that had impressed Fleur.

“Yes they specialize in teeth whitening, realignment, and other things of that nature,” Hermione said with a roll of her eyes. “And yet they still don’t want me to try and find a potion that could shrink my teeth.”

“You will grow into them,” Fleur said firmly. “That kind of talk is ridiculous. You have such pretty hair, and your face is already losing its baby fat. You will grow into your teeth, and the boys, they will be all over you.”

“Coming from you, I’ll take that as a compliment I suppose,” Hermione said with a laugh.

“But you did not answer my earlier question,” Fleur asked, prodding Hermione delicately.

Hermione shrugged. “While magic is amazing, I have… let us call it a **goal** for my future. It sounds so much better than obsession after all she thought, with wry self-awareness. “And to reach that goal, I need to have a foot in both worlds.”

“Interesting,” Fleur murmured. “What are you learning then on the other side? I know of some of what they teach there, mathematics, astrology certainly, we have long acknowledged the muggles are well ahead of wizard-kind there, and history.”

“All of that and programming, some engineering, advanced string theory when I get to it, and other things.” In particular, Hermione was interested in programming, because she was almost certain that the magic had somehow reacted to the computer’s program, and that had influenced whatever had happened to Harry. Once she could figure out where, or rather how it was done, she could figure out how to bring him back.

*The headmaster and the others don’t want to share their thoughts on the matter, and the Unspeakables don’t let anyone in to see the computer again? Fine, I don’t need them, I can find my own solution!* The petite, extremely frizzy haired genius thought to herself, not noticing how her eyes began to light up like a madman as she thought, rubbing her hands together gleefully as she imagined all of the learning she had to do for this.

Fleur did notice and took a step back, scratching at her ear thoughtfully as she stared at the younger girl. *Why do I think that with this girl around, school is going to cease being boring quite quickly?*

**OOOOOOO**

Of course, there were some students who would prefer boring. Back in Hogwarts, a disconsolate Ginny was sitting with Luna, her only friend from before Hogwarts, as she waxed eloquently on the fact that she had finally gotten to Hogwarts, only for Harry Potter to not be there. “I mean what the heck! I thought the headmaster was supposed to be watching out for him. And then this disappearance happens, and he steps down as headmaster, and all the rest of it and the Boy-Who-Lived isn’t around anymore” she growled ferociously, poking her lunch with her fork.

She had initially pulled Luna over to sit with her because the other girl looked a little lonely to Ginny, but also because Luna was good Ron-repellant at mealtimes. She had gotten into Gryffindor of course, just like the rest of her family, but there was no rule that said you had to stand at your own tables. Besides, they’d already gotten their course schedules, and the rest of the students were only waiting for the headmistress to make an announcement at this point before the first day of school could begin.

Luna smiled that special smile of hers that showed her brain was somewhere else, a look that would’ve gotten Luna teased by anyone else, except for Fred, George, and the rest of the Weasley’s bar her dumb bunny of a brother Ron. Ginny had thought at first that teasing Luna was Ron’s way of showing that he liked her, but since he’d taken to calling her Loony, that a gone out the window.

“Harry Potter will return due time, when the time is right for him to do so. And not before. But he will be changed by the experiences I think,” Luna said.

As Ginny was blinking at her friend in confusion, wondering what she meant, Ron was busy worrying about another missing student. “Darn it, I can’t believe that Hermione went through with her plan to transfer to Beauxbatons. Is that even allowed?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never heard of such transfers, but if she didn’t want to continue her education here after last year and all that’s occurred this summer it was probably her best choice.” Percy said from where he was trying not to notice his brother’s horrible table manners. “I think we should just be glad her parents didn’t try to pull her out of the Magical World entirely.

“Huh? Why? If she weren’t in school at least she’d still be in England you know?” Ron asked around a mouthful of bacon.

“I believe that once you enter the Magical World, you must complete your magical education in one of the schools. There are no tutors for muggleborn. If they do not finish their education, the individual’s magic would be burned out of them, all of their memories of the magical world erased along with those of the parents. The Statute of Secrecy must be maintained after all.”

“God I hope that didn’t happen,” Ron said, his earlier irritation with Hermione disappearing instantly. She might’ve gone to the frogs, but even that was batter better than being without magic.

“I’m still getting used to the fact that Dumbledore is not around,” Fred muttered. “What do you think McGonagall is going to be like in charge?”

“I think brother dear we’re about to find out,” his twin replied.

Everyone at the table looked up towards where Prof. McGonagall it stood up and was waving her hand in the air, intoning a spell none of the students could hear over the chatter they were generating. Silence slammed down throughout the hall, and she stood there for a moment holding the spell like that, before canceling.

“Thank you for your attention,” she said a second later, her town firm and no-nonsense. “Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, Albus Dumbledore stepped down as headmaster prior to the school year beginning. However, I have been acting as his deputy for a very long time, so you should not be concerned about the quality of education here going down. Indeed, I believe that with a bit more discipline and adherence to the rules of this school, it will go up.”

She ignored the groans from the two Weasley twins with ease, gesturing to one side, as a large parchment floated up off the table. She hit it with another spell, and it duplicated into fours, before floating out to each table. “Copies of this, the new guideline for students, has already been posted in your common rooms. There are new rules on there that I urge you all to look over closely. Ignorance of the rules is no defense.”

She glared at a few students in Ravenclaw, then twitched her glare to a silently fuming Snape then to a few of his Slytherins. “These sheets will tell you the system that **every** teacher will follow regarding punishments in terms of points and detentions, all the way to expulsion. They also will show you the rules, showing what will be regarded as bullying, the penalties for the usage of racial slurs, and what is and what is not allowed as personal property on Hogwarts ground.”

*Albus might’ve thought that the statues, ghosts and portraits were enough to keep his thumb on the lives of the students. I don’t*, McGonagall thought as more than one of the Slytherin students shouted a protest as they saw the forbidden words on the list.

The Weasley twins too were shouting angrily at some of them, knowing that a few of those rules have been targeted towards them and their pranks. The Ravenclaws were also protesting, although not about that. Instead they were shouting out about the new rules for taking books out of the library. All of them thought they should be allowed to take any book as long as they wanted so long as it was returned in pristine condition. But hoarding like that would no longer be allowed. The other three houses needed equal access to those books.

Deciding this had gone long enough, Minerva decided to end things here. “These are rules ladies and gentlemen, not subjects for debate!” she boomed in the thunderous voice, a voice trained in hundreds of classrooms. This instantly silencing the room except for Draco, who began his normal shout of when my father before pausing as he remembered that his father was in jail, most likely for the rest of his life.

His pace paled, and he sat down, but he was still glaring at McGonagall angrily. Draco had hoped to return to a bit of normality after his life had been turned upside down this past summer. But that was not going to happen.

He wasn’t the only one glaring at her, but Minerva was fine with that. These rules were meant to make this school a better place, a safer place, a place with more equality and more emphasis on education. *I will never be as famous, or as well-liked as Albus. But that is fine, I will make my own mark on this school, in discipline and safety,* she thought, smiling thinly as she felt Snape staring at her. *And that might mean more changes in the future, and not just to the rules of the student.*

OOOOOOO

“Amelia!” Shouted Prof. McGonagall’s voice through the fireplace.

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, jumped, slamming her leg into the underside of her desk both surprised by the sudden call and thrown off balance by the tone of the older woman’s voice. She had not heard that tone in the old woman’s voice since war against Voldemort ended and it shocked her out of the dull blah mindset she had fallen into after a routine day of paperwork.

“What is it Minerva?” she asked, looking over at the slightly older woman.

“I have an unregistered Animagus who was hiding among my students, for years apparently,” Minerva said scowling angrily. But Amelia could tell he wasn’t directed towards her, rather it was directed toward Minerva herself, something her next words proved. “All these years, all these years that rat lived! I should’ve realized!

“Rat?” Amelia asked, cutting through the other woman’s self-flagellation.

“The Weasley’s pet rat, Scabbers. I just conducted a survey of the school’s pets, a routine set of tests on them you know, disease, intelligence, familiar check. none of the Spells worked on the rat and it seemed to panic in its cage the instant I started to cast spells on it. Thank goodness I had all the pets in cages when I went over them. I instantly stunned it, and then used the *Humanum Revellio* on it, which gave me a positive return.” Minerva reported crisply. “I would rather undo its animal form with more wands than my own and Filius’s here, so if you could…”

“Of course! I’ll get a team together and be there instantly.” Amelia stood up purposefully. “In fact, I’ll come myself.” This looked way more interesting than paperwork after all.

And so the stones kept tumbling down in the avalanche of change that had begun with Harry Potter’s disappearance.

**OOOOOOO**

Beregost was a small town, surrounded by an outer hedge wall, with brambles and thorns growing through it that looked almost like barbwire to Imoen’s eyes, with more than two dozen houses and larger buildings within. Some of these included inns, many of which had signs telling you how to get to them before you even reached the town from the north.

At the entrance way cut into the outer hedge wall there was a squad of six Flaming Fist guards. Harry examined them as they came up, and though he didn’t have as good an idea of armor as he should have, he thought they looked smart and organized. The notification over their heads also agreed with them.

Flaming Fist Guard.

Another type of humanoid, or specifically human in this case, type of warrior who is not an adventurer. While not able to stand up against an Adventurer one-on-one, Flaming Fists come in packs like wolves.

Organized, well-equipped, and sometimes even well led, these are the soldiers of Baldur’s Gate, its principal army, police force, and investigation team all in one.

Leading them was a woman, whose title read,

‘Valerie, level ten adventurer’.

An Adventurer who joined the Flaming Fist Valerie is known to be somewhat fast with her sword and much faster with her mind, an organizer and decent field commander all in one, despite some… question about her time out of uniform.

Status: Wary Interest. While she is leery of you as a stranger coming to her town, she is willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, and maybe become interested you in another way…

That relationship status threw Harry for a moment, but he still noted that she was wearing the same armor as the Flaming Fist guards, and she stood among their number, which Harry felt was something he had to note for the future. It looked as if the mercenary groups could also have adventurers among them, which, if he ever had to fight one, was something he’d have to be aware of.

“Name and reason for your visit to Beregost?” the woman asked.

Jaheira, Khalid and Imoen all looked to Harry to speak for them, which caused him to groan a little, before he stood forward smiling at the woman politely. “Harry, and his party, Imoen, Jaheira, and Khalid. Might I ask why you’re checking visitors? Is it just the recent troubles, or something specific?”

“Just the recent troubles, no one can be too careful after all,” the woman said, actually sending him a smile, her eyes flicking up and down Harry’s body.

Valerie’s Relationship has changed from wary Interest to Interest. Charisma for the win, boy!

Harry blinked at that, noting that Valerie’s name over her head had changed to the pulsing pink that Cassandra and Phyldia’s had. But then, as Imoen elbowed him in the side, smirking he replied. “Well Miss…”

“Miss?” Valerie interrupted, laughing. “I don’t think so, or are you trying to make me feel old?”

“Not at all,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “I was just trying to be polite. After all your what b,,”

At that point he was interrupted by Imoen putting her hand over his mouth, while Khalid laughed behind her. “I have to stop you there Harry! Just say she’s beautiful and young and leave it at that. Don’t play guessing games.”

After Harry nodded Imoen released him, holding out her hand to the woman who took it, a smirk on her face after watching the two interact. “My name’s Imoen” she said.

“Charmed, and I wasn’t going to take offense unless he guessed in the high thirties or something,” she said chuckling as she led the way through the hedge wall. “I’ll need you to sign your names to the book here. You’re all adventurers correct?”

“That’s right, why?” Harry asked.

“We’ve got several bounties you might be interested in, and there’s a paladin looking around for help to hunch down a band of ogres. I also have to to ask you what the conditions were like on the road from wherever you came from,” Valerie rattled off as she crossed to a small desk set out in the open next to the inner wall of the hedge.

“We came from the Friendly Arm Inn, and the conditions of the road itself was nice, the conditions not so much.” From there Harry began to relate what they had run into with the help of the others occasionally.

Valerie frowned, listening to the description of the bandits that they had taken out. The ogre wasn’t of much interest to her, oh she’d heard about him, some strange ogre with a girdle fetish, but he was well out of her jurisdiction.

The bandits though, she grinned savagely hearing of their demise, her joy only slightly tainted by the fact that they had taken one final group of victims. “Hard luck on that caravan, and harder luck for some of the guards. I know one of them was some kind of highborn from the gate, an heir to one of their noble houses. And I know at least two of those boys came from here in Beregost. Stupid idiots, who thought that just because they could pick up a spear meant they could fight.”

“This world is often times cruel to the foolish,” Jaheira said with a sigh.

“You said you had some of their belongings?”

“We’ve got their chain mail, notes, messages, some jewelry and a cloak a or two,” Harry said pulling out the items from his item box. Jaheira rolled her eyes, and Harry paused, as he lost -10 trust with Jaheira. And -5 trust with Khalid suddenly. *Right, the item box, most people can’t use it like I can.*

quick thinking quickly, he then accidentally pulled out several other things, while looking for the final bits and pieces.

That did not regain the trust he had just lost with the married couple but earned him a few points of respect from both half-elves, and Valerie stopped looking as amazed, putting down that first time pulling out what he had been looking for as luck.

“Still, wiping out those bandits was good work.

Finding their camp like that after you killed would have been even better, but I suppose we can’t be too picky.”

Having ‘finally’ found the bunch of scalps from the bandits Harry dropped them onto Valerie’s desk. She looked at them, counting each of them off, then went back to looking through the effects Harry and the others had brought back before nodding. “The scalps seem in order, and the rest I can send on to the proper families. stop by later at our garrison and I’ll give you the money then. Or…” she said as if a sudden thought had occurred to her. “We could meet up at one of the inns. The Red Sheath? Maybe have a drink and talk then.”

Harry slowly nodded, flushing slightly as he went through all the extra meanings of that statement and the way she’d said it. “I’d like that.”

“Excellent, I’ll be off doing the rounds for…” she looked up at the sun. “Another three hours I think.” Harry nodded, and turned back to his companions

They entered the town proper after that, with Imoen and Khalid and even Jaheira teasing Harry about how he had gone from accidentally insulting, to flirting with the guard officer, and now had something of a date to look forward to. “It’s just drinks,” he protested feebly. “And it’s not important regardless. We should be looking around for jobs we can do while waiting.”

“Actually Harry, you’re forgetting one of them already, that house with the spiders. Landrin’s job for us, remember?”

“Good point,” Harry said with a nod to Imoen’s comment. “Let’s see if we can find it.”

A few streets later, they found a house with a notice stuck to the outer gate. “’Caution spiders: enter at own risk’. So these are not going to be run-of-the-mill spiders,” Harry quipped.

“Actually they probably are,” Jaheira said with a shrug. “Certain spiders after all can grow to the size of a man.”

Harry simply blinked at that, then shook his head slightly. Fine, we won’t touch that one. Do you think we’ll need a torch or something in there?” He asked, looking at the windows. They seemed blocked up by something, though Harry couldn’t tell what it was.

“Quite probably, and don’t expect Tangling Vines to be as useful here as it is out in nature. That spell works much better when there is some plant life to work with.”

Harry nodded, but pulled out his tower shield and sword, as a helmet he had taken from one of the bandits in the last fight. It was a simple bucket-shaped helmet with a bit of metal moving down from the rim above the eyes to cover his nose which left much of his face and neck unprotects.

Looking at that helmet and comparing it to his own helmet with its armored mouth and nose piece and longer sides to protect his neck, Khalid shook his head. “W, w, we’ll need to be getting you some bett, t, t, better armor lad.”

“Good point Khalid, and we’ll want to find someone here that we can sell jewels too. Uncut jewels, like the bag I sold as part of the payment for my shield.”

“And you still haven’t told us where you got all those?”

“I’ll tell you after we clear out the spiders,” Harry said nodding. He would have to come up with the story for that that was the kind of thing he couldn’t put down to his AA system after all.

“I don’t know why you’re so concerned about that Harry, it’s not like Frederick is ever going to leave Candlekeep. And that gem duplication product of his was actually just a byproduct of his real experiments,” Imoen cut in, smirking.

“Gem duplication?” Jaheira asked quickly, frowning as she thought through all the implications of such a thing.

“Frederick is this Seeker we know, who likes to experiment. He figured out this way of basically re-creating the process through which gems are made. But that was a byproduct for his real experiments.,”

“Let me guess, he was trying to turn lead into gold,” Jaheira said with a sigh. “Such nonsense. Alchemists, ugh.”

Harry chuckled, but nodded. “Something like that I think. When I started to do odd jobs for him, I didn’t actually understand what he was saying. Anyway, Imoen here discovered that the copies were just as good as the original, and were exact copies, so were even worth more as a set. We kept on doing small jobs, and he kept on paying us for them in gems, thinking he was skimping us. I’ve got over four hundred of the things still.”

By that point they had reached the doorway to Landrin’s house and Harry opened it, quickly entering, his shield up and pushed forward to protect as much of his body as it could, ankle to chest. Harry figured that any threat from spiders would come at ground level.

But they were not attacked right away, and Jaheira rolled her eyes. “I see that at least in this, you have not had any training. Spiders are ambush animals; they will not simply wait by the doorway and charge forward. They will wait until we are within, and then they will come at us from every direction.”

“You are a little bundle of joy sometimes Jaheira,” Harry muttered, looking at her thoughtfully, causing Khalid to let loose a crack of laughter and her to scowl. But he went on more seriously. “I don’t suppose you have a seeing in the dark spell that you could use on Imoen and I? It’s dark as blazes in here, and I’d rather not have one of us have to hold a torch instead of a weapon or shield.”

“And here is an, an, another thing we can te, te, teach you,” Khalid said with a laugh, as Jaheira stopped glaring to pull off her buckler, handing it to Harry to put in his items space for her with just a bit more force than was needed.

As he did so, Harry noticed that he had also somehow won twenty respect points.

You have earned +20 Respect points for Jaheira. Huh? It looks like Jaheira might have a sense of humor. Don’t let on you can tell though, she might have to kill you.

While Harry read that and again wondered why the AA skill didn’t seem to like Jaheira, the half-elf herself pulled out from her bag, her physical bag rather than her item box, some flint and tender. Looking around she then picking up a hunk of wood from a box next to the door, dowsing it with a little bit of cooking oil, to get the fire going.

She then held the torch in her shield hand, while still holding her slingshot in the other.

Imoen looked at her, then around the interior of the house from the protection of the doorway before shaking her head. “No way could I get an arrow shot off in these close confines. I hope you don’t mind if I borrow that buckler of yours.”

“Not at all child, although I do not think you had a spot in sword and shield.”

“Only the one,” Imoen said grimly. “But, any help is, you know, helpful.” She then equipped her short sword, before activating her skill Hide in Shadows.

Harry ignored the normal heads up communication on that score as he entered the doorway, with Khalid behind him for a moment before Harry had him spread out and back to Harry’s shield side. They fell into a diamond formation, with Harry in the front, Khalid to one side, with Imoen to the other side of him and Jaheira in the far back closest to the door, which slowly closed behind them, leaving them in torchlight alone. Imoen was not there to the other’s senses, but Harry could still see her on his map.

What he couldn’t see were any enemies. That wasn’t good. It meant that creatures with an ambush specialty could avoid his map’s detection, something which he told the others as it occurred to him. They all noticed then that the interior of the house was as dark as Harry had feared. The windows, such as they were, had been covered up by inches thick webs, blocking out the light. But from the light of the torch, he could make out a fireplace set to one side, a few chairs, one quite nicely padded, a doorway leading into what was probably a kitchen, judging by what he could see through the doorway, and a set of stairs leading upwards.

They moved forward, and he asked in a whisper, “Is there any way to spot them before they attack? My map is not helping here.”

“No,” Jaheira said, her own eyes sweeping the interior, looking very deliberately away from the torch in her hand. Then she spotted the fireplace and pulled back her hand hurling the torch forward with surprising accuracy.

The torch landed in the fireplace, where, as she had thought, some very dry wood started to catch fire as well, which gave them a little more firelight first set few seconds and as she did, the spiders attacked.

One of them appeared in front of Jaheira, leaping forward and bearing her to the earth with a startled cry. But she had been tense since entering the house expecting something similar and had her staff up between herself and the biting mandibles of the spider.

Another spider appeared in front of and leaped onto Harry, his bestiary opening to it’s new page at the same time.

Huge Spiders

These large, dangerous ambush predators hail from all around Faerun. Their hides are as tough as a rhino’s, their bites sometimes carry poison, and their limbs are strong enough to knock a grown man off his feet. They are immune to web, hold animal, but not Tangle or other similar spells. Their bodies take slashing attacks better than thrust type, and worse are blunt object strikes which can do internal damage.

Attitude towards adventurers: antipathy. If you don’t enter their territory they won’t bother you. If you do, then you are fare game, just like everything else they can catch and eat

Weaknesses: Contrary to popular belief, spider web doesn’t burn. Water can drown them, but concussive type magic works best. They also don’t like operating in light.

But he lifted his shield, getting it between the two of them and taking the things wait on it, slicing quickly with his sword. The side of the spider seemed to absorb much of his blow, but still it started to bleed, chattering in as much pain as anger now, it’s mandibles flailing and it’s legs trying to scrabble around the shield to Harry.

Khalid faced two of the beasts, and wavered moving one way than the other, blocking and then dodging. Then Imoen appeared out from behind her own Hide in Shadows, beside one of the beasts, thrusting sideways, slamming her hand on to the hilt of her sword to push her short sword deeper into the creature. It squealed, convulsing but its tough hide was unable to stop a thrust like that and Imoen’s sword burst through her his abdomen unlike Harry’s slash,, which had been blunted by the naturally bristly skin of the spider.

Khalid has used shield bash.

Shield Bash successful, Huge Spider is stunned.

Harry saw this message as Khalid attacked the other one, smashing it backwards with his shield. The Stun actually caused it to collapse to the ground, it’s legs flailing out from beneath it. This opened up its head and body to a stab from his sword, and Khalid killed it a second later with a stab right between the eyes.

That spider was the first to actually die, followed next by Imoen’s, but the one which had attacked Harry had retreated. At the same time, Harry could hear the skittering of more as suddenly a rash of tiny red dots appeared in the corner of his map in the direction of the stairwell. Lots of them.

Seeing that and also having taken in the rest of the downstairs, Harry made a choice. *Tower shield don’t fail me now!* “Khalid, Imoen help Jaheira, then clear out the kitchen, I’ll guard the stair!” He shouted, as he himself moved towards the doorway and the stairwell leading up.

He got halfway up before several dozen more spiders, smaller ones began to skitter into view down the stairs, crawling over the stairs and one another to get to one another.

Small Spiders.

While still much larger than the common house spider these younglings are actually much smaller than the average giant spider. Like all spiders, they are immune to Web but can be affected by other immobilizing spells such as Entangle. Beyond their unusual size, their poison attack is more potent than the larger variety of spiders, but their hit points are less than a fourth of the huge spiders they later become, making them ever so much more squishable.

One of them died instantly as Harry smashed it with the bottom of his shield, indeed squishing nicely despite Harry not having the Shield Bash skill. He then sliced his sword sideways, catching another spider across its eyes, causing it to back away, one of its eight eyes busted open.

But the spiders coming behind those two were not stopped by Harry’s first victim. They crawled over them then started climbing up his tower shield, and around him, trying to swarm him under, but unable to: thankfully they couldn’t push themselves through the banister to one side, and Harry’s shield protected him from one side of the stairwell to the other.

Harry stabbed over his shield and down, killing one spider, then another, but the weight of them started to tell on his footing and he fought for balance on the steps. “Gah, I hate giant spiders!”

Behind him, Imoen and Khalid finished off the one spider that Harry had wounded, before moving to Jaheira’s aid, who had been holding off the spider that had taken her to the ground with her staff, the middle of the staff latched between the mandibles of the spider, as she twisted this way and that trying to shift its weight off her.

Luckily, the larger spider’s feet didn’t seem to be strong enough to punch through her chain mail, although she looked more than a little battered around the edges as they finally got to her, Khalid thrusting down into the back of the spider before grabbing the spider by the back of the head and pulling it off his wife tossing it aside.

Jaheira rolled then, push to her feet, and angrily slammed her staff into the ground. “Bark Skin!” She shouted, gesturing towards Harry.

Jaheira has cast bark skin on you. This spell gives the target’s skin all the durability of the bark of a mighty oak.

Durability +8 For the duration of the spell. Harry is now immune to poison.

It was a good thing she had done that, because Harry had been unable to keep the spiders from trying to swarm over his shield, and three of them had already bitten him. He had started to see the world in green, accompanied by the blasé notice of:

You are now poisoned. -1 to health every minute until healed.

But once Jaheira’s spell hit, Harry could feel the bites no longer being able to sink home. *Okay, I think I have a new favorite druid spell,* he thought, crushing one of the spiders to him with a bear hug, then grabbing up his sword and pushing two of the ones still on his shield away.

He still held the bottom of the stair though he’d been pushed backwards several steps, and the spiders still couldn’t move around him. Thanks to his tower shield, and now’s Jaheira spell, Harry was able to withstand it. Jaheira cast two healing spells, and a cure poison spell in swift succession, her fingers flying as she intoned the spells while Imoen and Khalid dealt with two more huge spiders in the doorway leading into the kitchen.

“Clear the kitchen before you come and help,” Harry repeated. “The last thing we need is to be attacked from behind.”

Grabbing up a chunk of now burning wood from the fireplace, Imoen and Jaheira and Khalid entered the kitchen quickly, looking around. Jaheira stayed there to tear out the spiderwebs and then moved resolutely to the windows, tearing down the spiderwebs there as Khalid and Imoen went to Harry’s aid. They took up position behind him and to the side of the stairwell stabbing up. Unlike the spiders, their swords could get through the banisters.

She was called back to heal Harry one more time before the flow of spiders finally began to peter out. “That was reckless, stupid, vainglorious…” Jaheira said, before breathing in deeply. “And quite effective, much as a I don’t like admitting it. She shook her head. “You have a head for tactics I have to admit. It that lot of spiders able to spread out, we would’ve had a much harder time.”

True, although I think from now on you were going to get into a fight, I am going to ask you to use that spell on as many of us as possible,” Harry said in reply, looking up the stairs. “So, do we finish down here first, or…”

“Finish down here first,” the others intoned, and Harry nodded approval. He stayed at the stairwell just in case more spiders were going to suddenly decide to throw themselves down into the murder alley that he had created there, but none appeared.

After that despite Harry’s concerns the fight on the second story was much easier than the first. They only ran into two large spiders there, larger than the others called sword spiders. Their legs were tipped with sword-like ends that were troublesome to deal with, causing several wounds to Harry and Khalid as they leaped out of their own Hide in Shadows. But without their fellows around they died faster, though the last one did knock Harry off his feet when his sword shattered on contact with one of its legs.

Groaning in more annoyance than pain, Harry held out his hands and was pulled to his feet by Khalid and Jaheira. “Well,” he said cheerfully I suppose that will teach me to…”

“Always make certain that an enemy is downed and dead Harry,” Jaheira said sternly, although her lips were twitching as she did.

For the next hour or so, the group went around the house, always in teams of two, just in case. They found several of the Small Spiders in areas whereby all rights they should never have been able to hide given their own size. However, they didn’t find any further dangers. The house was small and had been quite organized and clean at one point..

“It makes me wonder how the spiders got in,” Harry mused.

“Spiders like that can creep in occasionally, although, I don’t know how they were able to multiply without her calling in the guards.” Jaheira said with a nod.

“M, m, maybe the guards just don’t c, c, care about anything within the to, to, town so long as they’re protecting it fr, fr, from external threats,” Khalid asked shrugging her shoulders.

Imoen laughed shaking her head. “Nope, it was all a land grab scheme.”

“A what,” Khalid and Jaheira asked, while Harry simply for his brows, confusion plain on his face.

“It was a land grab scheme. The woman who gave us this job gave me a bit more background before you came back Harry. Her next-door neighbor planted them here, she wanted to basically buy out the house cheap. But the Flaming Fists discovered her part in the scheme and though they were unwilling to put forth the effort to clean out the spiders once the infestation had gained so much members, they arrested her the day before Landrin met us,” Imoen reported.

“That is kind of disturbing to be frank,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “I mean come on; those spiders could eventually have spread out from the house right?”

“Yes they could have,” Jaheira said simply. “I imagine that the next-door neighbor is going to be answering some very pointed questions by the town’s counsel about this.”

“Regardless,” Harry said with a shrug “I think we have a base of operations for our time in Beregost.”

“Indeed. If we stay here for any length of time this place will serve,” Jaheira approved. She looked around, smiling slightly at the sight of the interior of the main room now sans spiderwebs. “It certainly nice enough, almost homey, and once we get rid of all the spiderwebs, it’ll actually be quite clean and then wash down the interior it will be very nice indeed. But, I’ll warn you that Beregost isn’t near enough to Nashkel to serve as a base of operations for our investigation there.”

“True, but it’s a big town, I think we should stay here for of maybe three days, look around, do some odd jobs while also investigating anything about the bandits, sub-humans and the Iron Intake Issue.”

“Two days max,” Jaheira said firmly. “We must go on to Nashkel as soon as possible.”

“Khalid, Imoen? Your thoughts?” Harry asked, rather than trying to persuade Jaheira on her own.

Khalid thought about it, then shrugged. “I thi, th, think we don’t have enough in, in, information about what is go, g, going on here. Valerie to, to, told us, or rather she told y, y, you,” the older man said teasingly, “that there were a few dangers ar, ar, around the town, b, b, but are they connected to o, o, our real purpose? We don’t kn, kn, know yet.”

Harry nodded, understanding his point. Imoen shrugged. “I’d prefer to stay here a few days, but I have to admit that they’re right Harry. With that messenger guys message, I don’t think we can afford to really wait.”

“Exactly. The tension between Amn and Baldur’s Gate must end before anything else,” Jaheira said.

Harry winced. “Okay, I’d forgotten about though political tensions, sorry.”

Jaheira simply nodded magnanimous in her victory, deliberately biting her tongue to call him boy or youth or some such. Harry had proven himself to her over the past few days, and so she would not denigrate him like that. Not unless he screwed up royally, which simply forgetting the political aspects of the Iron Intake Issue was not.

“So one day? Or a day and a half?”

Something like that unless we find clues to a local individual who is connected to the Iron Intake Issue,” Jaheira said, sighing. “And oh my, that alliteration is getting irritating.”

“You’re telling me.” Harry grumbled. “My AA skill’s sense of humor can wear on anyone, but you all don’t have to put up with a 24 seven. Did you know what it said that one night we camped out right after taking care of the kobolds?”

He waited, then went on in a louder tone, making his voice deliberately jolly, like someone trying to come off as friendly but with a snowballs chance in hell of actually being believed. “’You have slept for eight hours. And you haven’t been attacked either, wow, that Luck stat really does work for you, doesn’t it?’”

“Yes,” Jaheira said dryly “That would be quite annoying. And now I am quite correct grateful that I do not have such a system. With my temperament, that would drive me up the wall.”

“We would say drive you batty,” Imoen said with a laugh. “But then again, we grew up in a keep.

“Bats are quite nice creatures, why would you say something like that? They eat mosquitoes and other allies, and are actually quite intelligent for their size,” Jaheira said her brows furrowing as she looked at the two of them. “I quite like them.”

Harry and Imoen blinked staring at her, then looked at one another and shrugged “Must be a druid thing,” they said as one, causing Khalid to laugh and Jaheira to roll her eyes.

Soon the cleanup was done, and after getting their beds ready, the group of them left the building, checking the time of day by staring up at the sun, which was just starting to set. “I think we should look around for short-term quests, stuff we can do in a day or so, and then head over to that tavern that Valerie mentioned.”

“Anxious for your date?” Jaheira teased, getting the words in before Imoen could, causing the younger girl to pout.

Harry shrugged, looked away sheepishly. “Well, she is good looking, and um, seemed interested in me so we’ll see where it goes.”

Unfortunately, while there were quests around the town, **none** could be accomplished without going out of their way. There was a ‘Blast Barbarous Bandits’ quest, which was being offered by the Governor of the town. There were several quests to hunt down this or that sub sentient band to return lost items. There was a missing person, a wife asking them to keep an eye out for her husband when they left the town heading south. There was indeed the Ankheg quest being offered by the local blacksmith, but they didn’t have any Ankheg hide yet.

And finally, there was indeed a paladin in the town, but he was not at all what Harry had expected. First of all, they found him in the Jovial juggler, a tavern which was popular among the younger set of the town, which was apt, since Bjornin was young, almost as young as Harry, and seemed even younger, with a baby face and innocent, if down on his luck, expression.

Harry took one look at the guy labeled ‘Bjornin, Paladin of Tyr level 7, and bit his lip to stop himself from asking if he really was a paladin. Instead, he slid onto a stool next to him and asked, “Paladin Bjornin? Officer Valerie said you had a quest to offer a party of adventurers.”

Bjornin twitched, nodding his head as he took in Harry, who was at least a foot taller than him, then his companions. “Um, yes, I, I do have a job for you. Um, I, I was ambushed by a group of ogres. They are attempting to fortify a chasm near Fisherman’s Lake. It’s an important source of food in these times of trouble. I, I attempted it myself but as much as I am a paladin, my skills have never laid in warcraft really.”

“You don’t say?” Jaheira muttered under her breath, obviously not impressed.

“Is this quest time sensitive?” Harry asked, ignoring her words and Imoen’s snicker.

“No, um, no. There aren’t very many of them, just the four, and they moved into the area just the day before last. I attempted to oust them the same day, but as I said my strength lies in my faith and piety rather than my sword arm. I was able to injure two slightly and take the arm off one, suit, but I was forced to flee back to town when my blade broke. I shan’t try that again, believe you me.”

“In that case, we have an existing quest that is taking us south. But as soon as we are done that quest we will return to Beregost and deal with these ogres for you,” Harry decided.

Bjornin thanked them, and after asking a few questions about Tyr, Imoen provided Harry an excuse to leave quickly before Bjornin could start proselytizing. After that with night now fallen, Harry led the trio to the Red Sheath, where they were going to meet Valerie for the reward of six hundred gold for the twelve bandit scalps. As they were walking, Harry frowned noticing something for the first time.

“What is it?” Imoen asked, looking over at them quizzically having notices frown.

“I just realized, that my mapping ability doesn’t look into houses and suchlike,” Harry said.

“Ac, ac, actually, that and the fact that it wa, wa, wasn’t able to see the spiders as t, t, they were using h, h, Hide in Shadows m, m, makes me feel better a, a about it. If it could d, d, do those two things, it would ju, ju, just be too powerful an ab, ab, ability to be believed could be si, si simply randomly given to you. E, e, even if you are a s, s, son of the Murder Manwhore,” Khalid said with a chuckle, using Harry’s term for the former God.

“Hey! That might be my father you’re talking about,” Harry said, causing Jaheira Imoen and Khalid to all stare at him in shock, before he went on smirking “even if he is a manwhore.”

They laughed, and Harry opened the door, pausing as his map updated instantly. He moved forward, frowning instantly as he saw where everyone’s markers were. There were fourteen people within the Red Sheath, it was hard to tell given some of the dots were overlapping in the main bar room.

But That wasn’t why he was frowning or had slowed down his steps. This was caused by the fact that most of them were the blue of noncombatants. One of them was even pulsing blue, and he supposed that might mean Valerie. But one of them was orange, and that orange signified a dwarf named Kharlat, Warrior level 3, who had been lounging against the wall in the outer area of the inn, a small welcome area cut off from the rest which had two fireplaces, unlit at the moment, and lots of coat racks. He supposed it was for wintertime. People could warm themselves up out here, leave behind the codes, and any snow they tramped in.

But the man, a dwarf, had been waiting there, and he looked up, his eyes bright as he sought spotted Harry. But Harry knew the orange meant a possible enemy, and so was ready when the man said, “No offense, but you shouldn’t have ever pissed off whoever you did piss off. But, money is money, and I’s mean to earn mine.”

With that, the man moved forward, stepping in close and moving for a stab with a short sword. Harry however simply dodged aside, his previously empty hand now holding a sword which came around in an arc to slice into the side of the man’s face. This greatly decreased the man’s hit points and burst an eyeball as well as tearing across his nose even as he pulled away. Kharlat staggered sideways and then Jaheira’s sling stone put out his other eye right before Harry’s sword swept back, cutting his throat. Before he could even start screaming really the dwarf had fallen dead at their feet.

“Let that be a lesson folks,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. “Even a warrior’s hit points aren’t enough to make you invincible. And one on four odds are freaking horrible. The moron.”

The brief sounds of battle had been audible inside the Sheath, and Valerie and two others stepped out. The other two were workers of some kind, large powerfully looking man, but unarmed, whereas Valerie had a sword, holding it like the Warrior she was. However, she frowned seeing Harry, and then the gnome. “Kharlat! He’s a cut purse and a drunk, but I didn’t think he would be stupid enough to ply his trade with you all.”

Harry shook his head. “I believe he intended to make the jump up to bounty hunting. It seems I have made an enemy somewhere out there,” said, searching the body and pulling out the bounty notice he had expected to find there, reading it aloud before handing over to Valerie. Everything was the same as the last one but the price being offered. “It’s gone up to, it was only two hundred and fifty gold before, now it’s three hundred and fifty.”

Harry also noticed that dealing with him so quickly had given him two hundred and seventy experience points. *Not as much as the first assassins they dealt with back in the Friendly Arm Inn, but then again this one was acting alone.*

Valerie grinned, her eyes racking up and down Harry’s body, and Harry saw a message.

Valerie’s interest in you has increased, Valerie’s relationship status is now Extremely Interested. She doesn’t want to jump your bones, but she wouldn’t say no to your jumping hers either either.

Harry shook his head slowly internally at that, almost but not quite worried about where this was going now.

“Mmm, that’s interesting, I like a man who makes powerful criminal enemies~,” she said almost cooing the words, linking her arm with his. “Let me buy you a drink, and you can tell me all about it.”

“Do you kn, kn, know what the wine sel, se, selection is like here?” Khalid asked, moving into the main hall with the two of them, his face lighting up eagerly.

“We’ve got quite a large selection I think,” Valerie said. “Although I’m more of a mead drinker myself.”

Khalid side theatrically at that. “H, h, humans, you wouldn’t kn, kn, know a good drink if you sw, sw, swam in it.”

“Harsh,” Harry muttered, turning his head as he heard Jaheira huff irritably.

Imoen was also looking at Khalid, then back to Jaheira. “So it wasn’t just at the Friendly Arm Inn?”

Jaheira shrugged, looking a little defensive. “He started to drink to help with the pain initially from the spell blast he took that caused his stutter. His recovery from the physical impact was at the time quite painful, but since, he does seem to have started to take too much interest in drink for my tastes.”

“Well, I’ll stay sober with you if you want,” Imoen said with a chuckle. “I’m not much of a drinker myself, whatever ya might have thought seeing me in action back at the Friendly Arm Inn.”

“No you just like flirting,” Jaheira teased back, and the two women followed Khalid, intent on keeping him out of trouble.

Once his friends had moved off, Valerie took Harry’s arm in both of hers, snuggling up next to him, pushing her chest into his side. Since she was no longer wearing armor, this was very noticeable. She then started to pull him, unresisting, to a nearby booth, where a magically chilled pitcher of mead and two steins already waited for them.

She pushed Harry into one side of the booth, then sat down next to him, wordlessly urging Harry to pour. After they’d both taken a drink she asked, “So are you going to tell me how you one that bounty?”

“I’d really rather not,” Harry replied shaking his head. “Sorry, it’s nothing personal but I think it might be dangerous for you?”

“Ooh, looking out for little old me big boy? Well, don’t worry, I won’t push. I think we can find something a lot more interesting to do with our time…”

A second later, their lips were locked in a kiss, and Harry found Valerie moving into his lap, slowly undulating against him. For a moment Harry just kissed back, then he began to see the messages he’d seen when with Cassandra.

You have activated advanced Perception at 67%.

This ability will allow you to read the body language, intent, and even desires of the individual you are romantically involved with. This will be shown by both a bit of an overall description, and then a wire outline.

Valerie enjoys being in the lead but might also enjoy the student passing the master. She is only mildly turned on and is into you for the moment due to your good looks and the air of mystery and power about you despite your relative low level. She has no wish to be involved further than a one night stand but might not even let it get that far if you start boring her.

After that, Valerie’s body was outlined to Harry’s eyes by an outline made of different colors, which faded into Harry’s mind, giving him more ‘impressions’ than anything else, guiding his actions subtly. Her mouth was green, and as Harry slowly deepened the kiss, he started to feel how to kiss her, how she liked her tongue teased, how she liked her thigh touched, but not her rear. In this manner, Valerie slowly lost control of their make-out session to Harry first becoming flustered, then aroused before pulling back, her expression shifting from aroused to confused.

Harry let her, smirking slightly as she slowly moved off his lap to sit next to him. “Ahem, well, that was a nice start I suppose, but I think I need another drink now. Before that though, tell me what you think of our town?”

Later, Imoen was staring at a very happy, yet somewhat bemused Harry as the four of them returned to Landrin’s house for the night. He had gotten several kisses make out sessions though she had seemed off-balance after the first kiss, as if not actually enjoying how well Harry could read her. It was something to keep in mind in the future. He had also gotten a promise for more from Valerie if he helped her kill off more bandit groups around Beregost.

“Why does it feel a little wrong that she put it like that?” Harry asked looking around at the other three as they sat down in the main sitting area of the house

Khalid was no help, his face was a little red from his wine intake, and Jaheira had propped him up in one chair. She was currently using his lap as a footrest, occasionally kicking him lightly in the side as she was doing it. It seemed as if it was a regular thing for him to get a little drunk, and for her to abuse him because of it, but Harry wasn’t going to get involved one way or the other.

“Not so much,” Jaheira said shaking her head. “It was obvious that Valerie liked the look of you, she only added on that bit of incentive at the end to make you come back to see her. Or she likes young men who are willing to get their hands dirty. Were you looking for something permanent?” Jaheira asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Harry thought about it, thought about Valerie, then thought about what he knew about relationships and what he liked about them. “I think I’m looking for something more permanent, but not from her. Hmm, that sound callous.”

“Do not worry about it,” Imoen said with a laugh. “She’s what I think my mentor called a cougar.”

Harry’s eyes widened and much of his guilt about having not lived up to Valerie’s expectations for the evening disappeared. But Jaheira needed more of an explanation, which Imoen, giggling gave. “It means an older woman who is into younger men.”

“Ahh, yes, I have met such women before, although the age difference here isn’t that large,” she mused before shrugging and getting to her feet. “Still it is time for bed all.” They had replaced the reed thrushes before heading out for the evening, and their cleaning up had been very thorough, so they were able to sleep the night away with only the faint scent of the spider repellent Jaheira had made invading her and Khalid’s dreams.

The next day, Jaheira looked at the morose, bleary-eyed Khalid, and the cheerful Harry. He had also drunk enough last night to gain a hangover, but that didn’t seem to be in evidence now. “Another advantage of your AA skill?”

“Yep,” Imoen replied for Harry. “I ran into it back in the Friendly Arm Inn. I think if we can get to sleep, any status change will go away.”

“Heh, now that is most definitely an incentive to become a full, trusted member of your party Harry. Certainly it would help my husband, especially if he insists on continuing the self-destructive behavior of last night. Getting drunk in public, honestly.”

Her husband turned her head to mock glare at the woman, and she only pulled back the tea she had just made specially for him. “I’m sorry, what do we say?”

“I, I’m s, sorry,” he whimpered, and I p, pr, promise not to drink t, to excess again.”

“If only I could believe you’d actually keep that promise,” Jaheira said with a laugh, handing over the herbal remedy for hangovers quickly. “I’d rather you promise not to eye up busty human barmaids, but I know that too to be an impossibility.” *And rather harmless besides, since he would never jeopardize our relationship by going further.*

It was a known pattern among elves and half-elves who travelled among humans: they became entranced by humans as humans were by elves, attracted to their liveliness, their energy and enthusiasm, and, it had to be said, their bodies. Elves, both men and women, tended to athletic and lithe forms, and half-elves too. Broad chests, powerful muscles, and large breasts, these were almost unknown among elves (although Jaheira had heard that Drow broke that mold). Jaheira knew Khalid had a wondering eye, but also knew he would never act on it.

In all honesty, she had a bigger problem with his addiction to wine, something he had begun to deal with the pain of the interrupted spell which had given him his stuttering problem. *But even there he has it under control. He never drinks to excess unless we are in a safe place, and other than that he won’t even drink while we are on the road. I will take that trade off every time.*

A few minutes later after it kicked in Khalid once more apologized for his attitude before adding, “But my d, d, dear, it isn’t as if you are with, with, without fault either. I do se, se, seem to recall a time where we were for, fo, forced to spy upon a gladiatorial arena w, wh, which was being used to launder fu, fun, funds for a Zhentarim operation. You were quite t, t, taken with…”

Jaheira scowled, looking away. “That was one time,” she said primly. “And indeed only a one day thing. Besides which, it was the gladiator’s face rather than his body or what he had below the neck that attracted my attention, like you and barmaids.”

Khalid chuckled, knowing he’d scored a point, and the two half-elves smiled at one another, shaking heads in unison.

“Is this a married thing?” Harry asked looking over at Imoen.

“I think it’s a married half-elf thing,” Imoen replied shaking her head.

“Anyway…” Harry said clapping his hands together to get everyone’s attention. “I think we have enough money now, with the money we’ve picked up along the way, and from the bounty on the bandits Valerie gave me, to check out the local blacksmith’s wares. Especially if he’s willing to pay good money for my lynx eye gems.”

Valerie’s words on the quality of the Smith quickly proved to be spot on as the quartet entered the smithy. It was large, larger than the Inn in Candlekeep actually, with seven different blacksmiths at work at any one time. One of them was on a small dais in the back, and read to Harry’s eyes as

Taerom Fuiruim Civilian.

Taerom is one of the most skilled and renowned blacksmiths in Amn or Baldur’s Gate, if not all of Faerun. Why he is acting as the chief blacksmith of a town like Beregost is no doubt a mystery. Regardless, he knows his craft, and what it is worth. Down to the last gold piece, alas.

Beware: Haggling is not advisable with Taerom or anyone who works for him.

He was working on something as they arrived, a gauntlet of some kind from the look of it, forcing them to work with one of the blacksmith’s clerks instead of him himself. Harry looked through the weapons and armors the man was trying to sell them in thought. A few items instantly stood out, including one that was an interesting number.

Beruel’s Retort.

Throwing axe +1. This series of throwing axes were designed by a dwarven blacksmith who always wanted a retort hand and one which could follow the person he was…discussing things with if they should flee from his argument. This weapon is enchanted to deal extra damage.

Sold in packs of 5.

Throwing Axe +1, 50% critical hit if the user has two skill points in Axes.

Hmm, I really like having a long range weapon I don’t have to sacrifice my shield for, so it’s either something like this, which I honestly hadn’t considered before this, or the one-handed sling that Jaheira used. Pity I don’t have a skill point in axes. And that second enchantment is impressive too. I think I might just by them to speculate, it’s not like they are much money, only seventy five gold.

“First I want a pack of those,” he said pointing at them. “After that, I suppose we should get the essentials out of the way. We need more arrows and arrowheads as well as at least one pack of crossbow bolts. And two each short and longswords. That should at least get us to Nashkel.”

“Heh, aye they’ll do that, and you’ll be doing us a favor taking that crud off our hands. Not even the Master knows what’s wrong with the iron, it heats the same, it reacts the same when struck, but it still cracks when tested. We’ve not been able to get in any good iron for more than a month. Lucky for us we’re just as good working with wood and leather than iron, and we’d put away a good bit of iron too.”

Iron Intake Issue has been updated: a clue has been found. Even one of the greatest blacksmiths in the area can’t tell you what has happened to the iron coming out of Nashkel. That points to something either magical or alchemical being done to the iron. The question then is, where is whatever this is coming from, and how is it getting into the iron?

+400 experience for the party members.

Be on the lookout for other single clues out there that will help you discover the source of the Iron Intake Issue!

Harry looked over the rest of what the smith was offering, quickly found a Short Bow +1 and a Medium Shield +1. A Small Shield +1 was reluctantly added to the pile, even though it’s durability was down to 30 out of 100, while the others were still at 100 out of 100.

Harry asked about it, and was told that, “We got that sword in lieu of a payment at one point. If you want, you can perform some maintenance on it for you, but it will be an extra two hundred gold.

Harry winced, shaking his head. “Hell no. It’s way too expensive as it is. Are you willing to take gems?” *If not we are not going to have gold for everything already.* Having gone through much of the cash they’d made in the tutorial to buy Harry’s shield and pay half of the cost of Jaheira’s sling back in the Friendly Arm Inn, Harry and Imoen had around one thousand, five hundred gold, most of which came from the bounty on the bandits they had killed and selling off all the items they had found on the bandits and guards yesterday. Khalid and Jaheira had a further one thousand gold from their share of the bounties and items.

“It depends on the quality,” the clerk began, before Harry pulled out a pouch from his side. He had remembered Jaheira’s injunction about not showing off his item box’s utility and had prepared for this beforehand.

He poured out several of the gems he had earned back in Candlekeep, and the man put them up one after another, examining them with disinterest at first, then excitedly. “They’re all the same, “he muttered in some shock, pulling away his jeweler’s monocle. “And they’re all of good quality. I think I need to speak to my boss about this if you’re… um… how much are you going to sell?”

Harry was about to reply but paused as Imoen said, “Harry, look at these!”

He turned and looked to where Jaheira and Imoen were looking over several items set aside from the regular stuff on sale.

There were four of them, and they were listed as master crafted works of Taerom himself. One, was shadow armor a highly modified version of the best armor a thief could have, which was apparently used almost exclusively by the Shadowmasters of the Shadow Thieves in Amn. The next was a poisoned dagger the size of a small sword, which had a +2 to its base damage and a poison that would be automatically used on the victim every time it hit. After that was the Army scythe, a light crossbow with a speed spell on it to make it fire at three times the normal speed along with a +1 to damage.

The fourth item wasn’t enchanted at all but was still expensive as heck at nine thousand gold. Though given the iron shortage and the craftsmanship that was obvious in it Harry couldn’t argue with the idea of a full suit of plate armor being expensive.

All of them were expensive as hell, and Harry rapidly tallied everything together, then said very firmly, “No.”

Imoen looked at him and Jaheira raised an eyebrow. Harry gestured them close and whispered, “We don’t have enough money. Even if I sold all my gems at once we wouldn’t have enough to buy the items we’ve already picked out and even one of these.”

“Th, th, that’s a pity, la, la, lad. Your armor is not going to last v, v, very much longer. Y, y, you need an up, u, upgrade.” Khalid said.

“I’d like one, but we can’t afford it,” Harry said.

Making it look as if she was hugging him commiseratingly, Imoen whispered directly into his ear to ask “Would we if you unloaded your spices? The amount of that salt, pepper, and the rest would surely add to our tally. And Khalid’s right, even if we can’t get the rest, you need an armor upgrade, mister close range combatant.”

“I’ve already added them in to my calculations, and I’m not selling them here,” Harry said with an eyeroll. “Apparently, spices like that are the purview of a local merchant who has a monopoly on them. so I’d have to pay a major fine, which would half the amount of money I could get for them.”

Looking around at at the two half-elves, Harry raised his voice. “Regardless, I’m not about to spend all of our money on something just for me. It’s better to spread out the money for all of us, have all of us be better prepared than only one of us.” That was why he had pitched in to buy Khalid and Jaheira armor after theirs had been near to ruined in the ambush back in the Friendly Arm Inn.

Khalid smiled, and Jaheira nodded approval, although Harry noticed that he had lost twenty respect with her for the decision, and gained fifty trust, while gaining ten in each for Khalid. He could almost understand her reasoning behind that one considering he’d shown in the fight against the bandits that yes, he needed better armor and should be looking out for himself more. But his thoughts on that score stopped a second later, because another message box appeared on top of those.

+1 Level to leadership. Twice now you decisions regarding equipment that serve the good of the party, rather than yourself, proving that you have their best interests at heart and know that the many is stronger than the one. Your Leadership ability has leveled up!

Charisma +2, Willpower, +4. Your observation skills will now see more than the the average adventurer.

*Now, that’s interesting,* Harry thought to himself, not noticing that both Khalid and Jaheira were looking at him closely. Breaking out of it he saw their stares and asked, “What?”

Jaheira moved over and whispered, “Now that we know what to look for, both of us were able to see you staring off into the distance there, Harry. What happened?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ll tell you later, it’s more a long term thing than a short term one. And thanks, I’ll try to work on that.”

The half-elven woman nodded, still looking at him in interest for a moment before he turned back to the clerk. “Now, where were we?”

Eventually, Harry was able to buy the items they’d already picked out. He was able however to get a refurbishment of the small shield +1 for free, though he parted with the better part of a third of his remaining jewels to do it. Apparently Taerom was going to use them to create a kind of armor for a nobleman so was quite happy to see so many jewels cut similarly.

“Thank you for this, Harry,” said Jaheira, shaking her head in some amusement as she put on the small shield +1 on her arm. “We’re so used to having to deal with the bare minimum on assignment in this area that having some good gear is an immense relief.”

Harry shrugged, and tapped his side where he had been stabbed during the fight with the bandits. “Let’s call it even for all the healing spells you’ve used on me,” he said, winking at her and causing Jaheira to laugh dryly, shaking her head.

As they at exited the blacksmith’s property, a man was walking by on the street in front of the shop. He took one look at their clothing, and then turned, purposefully moving towards them as he raised his voice in a near shout. “Gentlemen ladies, are you adventurers, and if so, might I inquire as to whether or not you are available for a small job?”

Behind Harry, Imoen murmured, “Oh my, now that is a pretty, **pretty** face.”

“Far too pretty to be of much use,” Jaheira replied. The two of them looked at one another than laughed.

Harry shook his head, looking over at Khalid. “Why is it if as if I feel as if my gender was just insulted?”

“F, f, female solidarity will give you that feeling quite a lot, H, h, Harry,” Khalid said with a chuckle before turning back to the other man who had just strode up to them, so he didn’t have to shout again. Evidently having been happy enough to get their attention first. Harry looked at him, taking his body in before looking up at the message he saw above them.

He was at least a foot shorter than Harry, maybe standing 5 feet nine, 5 feet 10 with a thin, but still well-built body, a short sword at his hip, and some kind of instrument on his back. He wore leggings, and leather armor, although that wasn’t exactly important, considering Harry had just left a blacksmith shop where he learned how expensive better armor was. A simple longbow also was tied to his back unstrung at the moment, and Harry supposed that he carried his arrows in his item box, although whether or not those were the only things in there and that they were thus useful, he didn’t know.

His face was indeed rather pretty: high, sculpted cheekbones, a wide smile, that almost but didn’t white cross the line into vacuous, deep blue eyes, and magnificent blonde hair, obviously well cared for pulled back from his forehead into a ponytail*. If I was a petty person, I might hate this fellow on first sight he’s that pretty,* Harry thought to himself. *Sort of what a good-natured Draco, if such a thing is actually possible at all, could look like.*

What was more interesting to Harry than his physical appearance though was the information he got from his newly advanced observation skill.

Garrick, level IV Bard.

A wandering Bard, Garrick has trained his wits, and his melodies rather than his body, hence his low level. Whether or not that equates to actually being useless is in a fight, is unknown.

His strength, endurance, durability and perhaps willpower are all suspect, but Garrick’s dexterity is something to be reckoned with.

*That bit about his stats being impacted by his past choices, that’s a very telling bit of information,* Harry thought, fighting the urge to look at his companions and then activate the journal pages about them to see if he could discern more about their stats in turn. The mystery of why they were so much less capable in most ways they should be given their level was eating at him, but he refused to invade their privacy like that.

*And he’s our age* Harry thought, turning his attention back to the pretty boy, *or should I say mine and Imoen’s ages anyway.* Still, the fact that he had walked up to Harry and the others like this, meant he was either in trouble, and Harry is saving people thing wasn’t going to let him pass, or this could be interesting. “What do you need?” he asked instead.

“My name is Garrick, and I am currently in the employ of a famous singer, whose name is Silk. She was here on request of the Governor, but she was supposed to move on. However, she is being threatened by a local merchant whose threats have scared away her other guards. They are threatening to kill her unless Lady Silk stay and perform for them in a private setting. She is offering to pay any adventurers I find to aid her against this menace.”

“By private setting I presume you mean something more will be required of her performance than merely song and dance?” Jaheira asked dryly.

“You have the right of it great lady,” Garrick said with a bow that was as graceful as it was overdone towards her.

Jaheira’s eyebrow rose in amusement, and Khalid coughed, staring at the man with unfriendly eyes for a moment. Harry chuckled, amused at the interaction, while Imoen mock-swooned, amusement plain on her own face.

“Still,” Harry said aloud, “perhaps we should at least meet with the Silk. If she is in danger of being forced to what I think you are suggesting, I can’t in good conscience leave a lady in such straits.”

“Nor would I expect you to,” Jaheira said, as the others all nodded. The decision was the right one instantly apparently, not just because Harry wouldn’t have made any other decision of course, but because it won him one hundred relationship points with Imoen, and twenty trust and respect points with both Khalid and Jaheira. That put Khalid within a hundred in each of leveling up into friendship status, which was very interesting. Harry still had no idea whether or not the man would be willing to take part in the party system without his wife, who Harry was still less than two-thirds of the way to making the shift from travelling companion to friend.

“Lead the way Garrick,” Harry said, once more putting the notes from his AA skill to one side in his mind.

Garrick coughed, and asked plaintively, “Um, might I have your names, adventurers?”

“Oh, right, I’m Harry, that’s Imoen, Jaheira and Khalid,” Harry replied.

Garrick nodded, and started to lead the way, making conversation with Imoen starting with her bubblegum pink hair. “It’s an amazing color, how do you keep it that bright a shade? I know a lot of bards and actresses who would love to be able to stand out like that.”

Imoen kept his attention on her for a time until they reached a small side street, where Garrick broke off, moving to the front of the group again. “There she is,” he said pointing ahead of them.

In the shadow of one of the buildings, a lady stood leaning against the side of the building. She was dressed in a cloak that covered her from shoulder down to ankle, but Harry could catch a glimpse of a good dress underneath, along with some jewelry around her neck, and some bangles on her wrists. She wore a kind of circlet or something in her hair to keep it out of her face, and the rest of her hair was slicked back and down.

She certainly looks the part of a decently wealthy actress, and singer. Her eyes however told him something different, and Harry’s newly upgraded of observed also warned him, as did his map, which showed her as a orange dot instead of the neutral blue of noncombatants.

Level 12 Mage, Silk.

Silk might look as if she is a fluttering nothing, but she has magic at her fingertips, and magic is the great equalizer. Beware, for you can also detect that she is wearing magical items.

As a Mage her stats are skewed to intelligence, wisdom and willpower above all, though like many mages, she might be able to offset this weakness in strength by summoning some muscle to help her.

Harry frowned, took a step backward from Garrick, to tap the nearest party member on their shoulder. This turned out to be Imoen, who had been looking down at Garrick’s butt with some approval on her face. She blinked and looked up at him, and Harry rolled his eyes but remained serious. “She’s more than she appears. If this woman needs help, we might be in for more of a fight than I thought.”

Imoen’s eyes narrowed, but by that point, Garrick had hailed Silk, who was moving towards them so they both shut up and watched her come. “These are the adventurers I found to help us Lady Silk,” Garrick said with a smile, and a deep bow, looking at Silk with calf eyes, and Harry blinked as another notice appeared in front of him, Garrick’s name suddenly being lined with a light pink color.

Garrick is infatuated. While not as bad as being Charmed, this status disability will impact his willpower and his ability to make logical decisions in the presence of his light-a-love.

*For once, my AA skill’s snark is actually helpful*, Harry mused, now more than a bit worried about what they might be walking into here. He gently nudged Imoen backwards bumping her into Jaheira and Khalid, and all three of them soon spread out, staying away from Silk but doing so in such a way that it almost looked natural.

“Thank you for your help adventurers,” Silk said, her tone, low, almost velvety or smoky, a voice made to grab a man’s attention. Both Harry and Khalid felt it, and Khalid had to shake his head and look away. Harry saw another message from his AA skill about his having passed a Willpower Check as Silk continued to speak, staring at Garrick, then the others, coming back to stare at Harry with deep, almost luminous black eyes.

“I know not what I did to draw this unwelcome interest from the man, but the chief gem merchant in this town has been after me since I arrived. I ordered a bird necklace from the man, and when it was finished, I had intended to pay him, but instead of allowing me to simply pay for it and leave, he raised the price, and then indicated he would be more than willing to lower it back down for a, a private session.”

Silk shivered, a frightened look appearing on her face. “When I refused to such a deal, I found myself accosted by his toughs every time I turned around, up to and including harassment at the inn I am staying at. He frightened away the two guards I arrived with in this manner. But because he is a wealthy merchant, the Flaming Fist guards refused to believe my story, so I am forced to look elsewhere for help.”

“Not even Lieutenant Valerie believed you?” Harry asked sharply.

The woman frowned a little bit at Harry, perhaps for his knowing the name of the Flaming Fist officer, though Harry wasn’t certain, but nodded her head. “She and I, well, women sometimes develop irrational hatred’s for one another upon meeting, and I’m rather afraid that our first meeting was when I was on stage singing. So Valerie and I do not get along to put it mildly.”

Harry frowned at that; he didn’t think that Valerie would be that irrational. *But who knows, Pansy and Hermione certainly formed a cordial hatred the instant they met one another, so it could be possible.* “Okay, I understand your problem miss. So do you want us to guard you as you leave the town, or…”

“Not at all no, I would not wish to take you out of your way like that,” Silk said, a faint scowl on her face as she gestured down the street behind her. “The man has reached out to me for a meeting, here at this time. That’s why I was so thankful to see you and your fellows Mister...”

“Harry,” Harry supplied. “And you agreed to meet with them?

“The alternative was to have them stop taking my no for an answer **entirely.** I felt that even if Garrick would be was unable to find adventurers that could help me, I could at least talk my way out of anything dangerous for a time in public like this.” She looked over at Garrick, bestowing a wan smile on him, and Harry could almost see the other young man’s mind go on a holiday as he flushed. “And I had told Garrick that if couldn’t find adventurers, to at least find a few witnesses.”

Garrick nodded, indicating that had been the case, and Harry scowled internally, idly noticing that Khalid and Imoen seemed to have bought Silk’s story while Jaheira looked skeptical. For his part, while her story seemed plausible, there was something about the woman that was setting his hackles on end, above and beyond her being a mage and a possible enemy. He just couldn’t figure out what.

Still, he nodded, and told Silk, “Well we’re at your service then.” He smiled suddenly. “We can talk about our payment afterwards, although I’ll warn you, we are in the need of some funds right now.”

Silk nodded agreement to that, since it made sense not to make any such plans before they understood what was needed. As Harry and Silk finished talking, six men appeared at the far end of the small alleyway, moving towards them. One of them was very obviously a well to do merchant, a little overweight, and very, very well dressed. He reminded Harry of some of the lords and ladies back in, Candlekeep who had paid their way into the keep rather than found a book to use as their entrance fee.

The other five were obviously bodyguards of some kind, leather armor, small shields, and short swords. And like Silk, in the map to Harry’s senses, unlike the rest of the people who Harry’s map had found in the town, they were orange. Each of them was reading to his senses as ‘private guards not much on their own, but be wary of them in groups’, but unlike the Flaming Fists, they each had their own names. Weird, but not something Harry wanted to think about right now.

At that moment, Silk pointed at the men coming towards them dramatically. “You see! This was supposed to be a meeting between myself and the merchant himself alone or with one companion, and he comes with five, all armed for trouble? He obviously intends to strong arm me despite our being in public! Do your duty adventurers!

“What do you mean?” Harry frowned, while his companions all readied their weapons, even Jaheira, although very reluctantly in her case.

“Attack!” Silk she shouted, pointing at the merchant and his guards. “Is that so hard to understand?”

“You want to attack us before we even hear what they have to say? Hell no,” Harry said shaking his head. “I’m not going to do it.”

As he spoke, Harry barely noticed the notice going up in his vision of the fact that he had made a choice, and Silk growled, as the merchant came up to them.

“Lady Silk,” he said, smiling disarmingly. “I thought that this business was supposed to between the two of us. Why have you brought adventurers with you? Surely you don’t feel threatened by my me and my men. Even here in Beregost when one goes to deliver as many gems as you purchased from me one should have protection.”

“That’s interesting,” Harry said, stepping back away from Silk and now looking at the two of them with a frown on his face. “Because she told us she had paid you for some work you had done, and you upped the price and refused to turn it over without a more personal payments than money.. But the way you’re talking, it sounds as if you’re here to give her some of your wares?”

Behind him, he could feel Imoen and the half-elves both stepping back as well, moving into a formation Khalid to his right, and Jaheira and Imoen directly behind him. With the enemies this close, both women had shifted from there long range weapons to a short sword for Imoen and her staff for Jaheira and were watching the possible conflict closely.

The merchant huffed. “Good sir, I am a prosperous and wealthy merchant, why ever would I jeopardize by standing in the community by importuning someone like Silk! Besides, my wife would skin me alive! No, I had given lady Silk a piece of jewelry that she had commissioned, but she had only paid me half of the agreed upon price but then mentioned she would pay for more, and for some cut gems too, at this time here.”

Silk scowled at Harry, pointing at the man dramatically. “He’s lying, obviously.”

“Someone’s lying,” Harry said with a nod. “I’m just not certain which of you is the one doing it. Regardless, I’m not about to start a fight here in a town, until I have all the information.”

While the merchant just nodded his head, evidently understanding and approving of Harry’s caution, Silk scowled angrily, her beautiful face now nowhere near as beautiful. She waved her hand slightly and a series of messages cascaded through Harry’s mental eye. “Are you sure you won’t change your mind,” Silk whispered, smiling at him, her tone shifting into a sensual caress. “For me?”

Willpower Check Passed. You have a strong will and have thrown off Silk’s attempt to use the spell Charm on you.

Imoen has been confused.

At the same time, Harry could see new status symbols appearing under Garrick, Khalid’s, and three of the five guard’s names. They all had been Charmed and would thus obey any order given to them by Silk for a set amount of time.

“I don’t think so,” Harry said taking a step backwards. “This is not my problem,” he said as he reached out and thumped Imoen on the back of the head, causing her confusion to falter, and her to step back into Jaheira. Khalid was still looking at Silk with love in his eyes though, and Harry scowled angrily remembering the fact that Khalid had a negative to such mental spells. “Release my companions from your spell Silk, or else!”

Jaheira to was looking at her husband worriedly, whispering something Elven. But that was all the attention Harry could spare for his party as Silk growled angrily, stepping back. “Fine! I should’ve known better than to trust Garrick to find right sort of adventurers for this! But if I have to do this myself, I will.”

“Boys!” she said suddenly to the merchants guards. “Get them.”

The four charmed guards instantly turned on the merchant and one guard who hadn’t been enchanted. The remaining guard put himself, his sword hacking out before they could attack, tying up one of them instantly. “Snap out of it ya bastards!”

Another moved to help their fellow against him, while two of the others came for Harry. But Harry leaped forward, moving quicker than the two to charmed men had been prepared for, going shield to shield with one man, and pushing him into his fellow off balance. *I’m getting a real hang of this shield combat thing, even if I can’t use Shield Bash just yet.* At the same time Harry’s sword flashed, and took the man in the side, cutting through his leather armor and deep into his chest, before pulling back out, sending him falling to the ground gasping in shock. “Don’t kill them, just wound them severely enough to knock them out of the Charm spell!”

To one side, Jaheira had engaged her husband, an utterly ferocious scowl on her face as she used her druid’s staff to smack away his blows. Luckily the Charmed spell removed the individual’s higher brain functions, and he was just attacking her in the same pattern over and over.

Imoen had already disappeared under Hide in Shadows, but she now reappeared next to to the non-enchanted guard, successfully backstabbing one of his opponents, and then engaging the other beside the last remaining guard. The stabbed fellow fell groaning and holding the injury to his side, the horrible nature of the wound knocking him out of the charmed spell. But Garrick, who had been edging forward to confront the merchant before this, now took up her attention, the two of them exchanging blows back and forth. It looked as if Garrick was extremely fast and accurate, if not very strong, but then again, neither

That part of the fight looked even, but Harry cursed as he realized that Imoen hadn’t realized how dangerous Silk was. Before he could finish the last guard facing him Silk had already conjured up a shield around herself and was now gesticulating and intoning rapidly in a magical incantation. “*Summon Monster: Golems*!” she shouted.

Two long strips of red and black that looked almost like wounds torn into the air appeared for a moment, and from within two large humanoid looking creatures. They were large, taller than Harry, wider in the body, with formless faces and chests, oversized fists and two gleaming red eyes. And as they did, the bestiary page about them appeared, with a bit more information than before thanks to Harry’s observation ability having gone up with his Leadership skill.

Flesh Golems, level 4

Golems are tough, durable creations of magic that enchanters and sorcerers often use as labor or guards. Depending on the variety, they can range from just dangerous, to insanely deadly. Flesh golems are the lowest class of Golem, but do not let that fool you.

Immune to Backstab. Immune to Poison. Immune to Pure Magical Attacks. Immune to electricity. Immune to Cold.

Enhanced durability: +25% Extra Armor against blunt damage, +50% resistance Against Slashing, +25 Damage Against Long Range Weaponry

These golems don’t seem as well made as most of the breed though, perhaps you can have some success aiming for the same weak points you would find on a human body. And remember to Stab, not Slash!

“Get out of here!” Harry shouted at the merchant, smacking the guard he’d been facing off balance and racing around him towards the mage, getting in close. But with Khalid tying up Jaheira, and Garrick and Imoen dueling to the other side, that left Harry alone to face Silk and her two summoned guards. She didn’t seem to be conjuring anything new though, and in fact looked to be gasping, swaying in her feet.

*Summoning the golems must’ve taken out of her on top of that shield.* No wonder Jaheira thought that my and Imoen’s shield was strange though, her shield looks really different in comparison to ours. Whereas their shield was an almost solid construct of blue energy, the sphere around Silk was a coruscating wave of different colors,

The next second Harry winced as a blow landed on his shield, so strong his arm throbbed, and Harry stumbled backwards, all his momentum halted. He also noticed that his tower shield +1 had just lost about ten points of durability from that one blow. In turn the golem he’d stabbed had lost five.

In reply his flashed forward, stabbing into the side of the other golems as it tried to come at him from the side. But the golem kept moving, wrenching his sword out of his grip. A second later, his ability to switch from one weapon to another came into play once more, and he twisted around the next blow of the golem, using his shield to carry the blow to one side, and then bringing his backup warhammer down in an overhead strike, slamming it into the thing’s forehead. He could see that the blow had made the thing lose about 15 health, with twenty five left, and he shook his head. *Damn, just like fighting an adventurer, you can’t kill them with a single good strike.*

The next second, the second golem’s blow slammed into him, and this time Harry wasn’t able to superimpose his shield in time, the shield out of position having carried the blow of the first golem to the side. He grunted in pain as he saw a message pop up informing him he’d lost 14 points of health, followed by a second.

You have broken a rib. Movement is impaired, speed is impaired. Agility is impaired.

If not healed by a spell, this wound will continue to have an impact on your body.

Rolling along the ground, Harry came to his knees, flinging his hammer around in a wide arc. The blow slammed into one of the golem’s knee causing it’s knee to collapse under it for just a moment. Then Harry was past it his hammer disappearing as he stabbed forward with another sword, slamming his full power behind the thrust. It staggered back, losing another fifteen health points, but it grabbed his outstretched arm with both arms, and before Harry could set his feet he found himself hauled off them and hurled into the wooden side of the building to one side.

So hard was the throw Harry’s back broke through the wood and he continued to crash to the floor until he slid to a stop, his body, in particular his back, throbbing with pain so much he didn’t need the message about his having lost another twenty five health to know he was hurting.

But then the two golems made a mistake. They followed him into the house, away from any witnesses. Still kneeling on the ground Harry looked up at them and allowed an almost vicious smile to appear on his face. “*Incendio*!” The fire spell lashed out in a line of fire to slam into the head and chest of the least wounded Golem. Then Harry changed his target, flashing the fire towards the second golem, who almost panicked despite being a construct, backing away rapidly. A second spell, Imoen’s Lacero spell lashed out, pulling both golems off their feet, and they rolled on the ground, desperately trying to put out the fire despite still not letting out a sound.

Ignoring the twin hits to his health points even as he started to feel a pounding headache at the back of his skull, Harry trooped forward, and brought his hammer down hard on the back of the Golem’s skulls one after another. With the least damaged golem before this it took three heavy blows to the head, with Harry actually having to dodge around it as it rolled around on fire. But eventually the two golems were dead, and he trooped out the hole in the wall, grateful that no one had been home to see or be run over by the battle.

At the same time Harry was dealing with the two Golems, Imoen and the guard were fighting the last two guards on their feet, the one Harry had bypassed having joined their part of the fight, and Garrick. Garrick wasn’t a bad swordsman despite his lack of strength, and he was actually faster and more dexterous than Imoen. Imoen’s agility allowed her to dodge his blows, but she hadn’t been able to land a blow in return or back away to slip into Hide in Shadows again.

Then the notice that Harry had used his Blood Magic popped up, and Imoen suddenly felt very stupid. *Right, I’m not just a sexy thief darn it, I’m a sexy thieving Blood Mage. Got to remember I’m not a muggle, ugh, whoever would have thought I’d ever have to think about that?* When next they clashed, Imoen dodged to the side rather than trying to take Garrick’s blow on her shield, her shield disappearing into her item box as she threw out a punch.

As the blow landed onto Garrick’s chin, she whispered, “Stupefy!” willing the spell to come out via her punch. She’d been experimenting with this on and off back in Candlekeep, and it paid off now. There was only a brief flash of red before Garrick collapsed, and she shouted. “Hell yeah, glass jaw for the win!” Before leaping behind one of the two remaining guards, bringing the flat of her sword down on the man’s head. The last guard turned and nearly stabbed her for her troubles, but the other man slammed the flat of his blade into the side of the man’s head, sending him crashing to the ground to join his fellows.

But of course, that left Jaheira and Khalid. Jaheira had kept her husband busy but had been slowly pushed back. Only the mindlessness of his attacks, and his desire to engage harry in defense of Silk, had kept her from being overwhelmed. Yet Jaheira had eventually been knocked to her knees, and was now straining upwards, her staff held sideways above her head pressing back against Khalid’s sword.

“Behind you my love!” Silk shouted, desperate now and directing her voice towards Khalid, who was the last of her Charmed victims still on his feet. Khalid turned, but too late, and Harry, who had snuck up behind him, got his arms up under Khalid’s armpits, locking them in behind his head. He then twisted this way and that, shouting into his ear. “Snap out of it man!” Khalid didn’t and continued to struggle, but despite his much higher level, the half-elf lacked the strength to break out of Harry’s arms.

Now without even Khalid to protect her and with her shield losing strength quickly, the sorceress decided it was time for the better part of valor. She turned, her icon on Harry’s map turning yellow as she raced away.

“I think not,” Jaheira shouted, quickly flashing her fingers through a series of moves, then thrusting out her hand, sending out Tangling Vines.

“That spell must be one of your favorites,” Imoen said, also glaring as the retreating sorceress was grabbed by the spell.

“Indeed, it is most efficacious. “Now it only depends on whether or not her shield lasts longer, or my spell. And if it doesn’t, I can always cost another which she most certainly cannot,” Jaheira said smiling evilly at the sorceress, who was looking down at the tangling vines which had burst up through her shield from below. Her shield after all was only a fourth level magic shield, which didn’t do anything against spells which didn’t cause direct damage.

Harry wondered idly if her shield would stop a stunner, before he looked down at Khalid in his arms, who was shaking his head blearily. “W, wh, what happened?” Khalid asked, looking up at Harry and then over at his wife.

“You were charmed and deeply too,” Harry said shaking his head. You really need to work on getting some more immunity to those kinds of mental attacks my friend.”

While she was not looking happy, Jaheira shook her head. “It’s not his fault.” She narrowed her eyes, looking at Harry speculatively. “In fact, I’m impressed that you were able to throw that spell off.”

“My willpower is strong,” Harry said pompously, before leaning in, whispering. “Besides, you saw my stats back in the Friendly Arm Inn.”

“True,” Jaheira said with a nod, a frown appearing once more on her face as she turned back to Khalid, saying something to him before moving to heal the wounded guards they had been forced to fight a moment ago.

Behind her Harry paused, seeing that answer had made her respect for him go up, and he frowned in confusion. *Maybe just the memory of that discussion was enough? How much I showed them all that I trusted them yet also was smart enough to withhold information? Or maybe she just likes the fact that I can’t be charmed. Weird, but whatever.*

Shaking that off he looked at the merchant, his one conscious and uninjured guard, and the unconscious Garrick. “What do we do with him?” he asked, gesturing down to Garrick.

Garrick however was already stirring, shaking his head. “ooh, did som’ne throw a flagon at me head agin, oooh….” He looked up, frowning as he took in the surroundings, first in confusion then in moral outrage. “What, that, that witch! She she ensorcelled me!”

“The proper term is charmed,” Jaheira said with an eyeroll, removing her hands and wiping at a sweat-streaked forehead. Keeping her husband from overcoming her defenses had taken a lot, and she’d been forced to use every healing spell in her repertoire to save the lives of the formerly Charmed guards and heal Harry’s ribs. He’d broken a second rib in the impact with the wall.

Seeing this the merchant breathed a sigh of relief as his last guard, the one Harry had stabbed in the side, began to breath more easily. None of the downed bodyguards were going to get up anytime soon though. But they were alive, and so was he, that was the most important thing. “Thank you Adventurers, if not for you, we would all probably be dead right now. Is there anything I can do to pay you back for this?”

“Actually,” Harry said with a smile. “I have quite a few gems I need to sell, and…”

“Say no more, my lad!” the merchant said with a laugh, shaking his head. “All buy them at the same price I’d give to a fellow member of the Merchants’ Guild! You can’t get better than that in this town.”

“Would I if I went somewhere else?” Harry asked seriously.

Flush off of his recent brush with death, the merchant answered easily. “If you went south, you might get some promissory notes that are worth more in Nashkel, but you’d have to go much further south, into Amn, to find someone who was willing to pay you in cash. A promissory note from Nashkel would only be good to cash in up in the Gate – possibly, I’d bet no money on that - or there in Nashkel. We wouldn’t take them here, not with the way the wind is blowing.”

Harry nodded slowly at that, thinking hard, looking around at the others for their opinion. Jaheira of course had one, saying that he should wait for the promissory note. “We might need the money to fuel our… quest down there,” she said, hinting at their true mission.

Khalid said that having something in hand now was actually a better idea disagreeing with his wife for the first time Harry had ever heard. Imoen said that it depended on where they be going to shop. “That blacksmith guy, I think we’d have to go really way a far field to find anything like his goods, and the merchant here just said they wouldn’t take the promissory notes here. So cash to spend back here would be the best idea.”

Harry nodded, thinking about it then said “I think I’ll take the cash now. After all, cash will spend just as well down in Nashkel as promissory notes, and I doubt we’ll need that much money to grease our quest’s wheels when we arrive.” With that he turned, pulling off the heavy burlap bag on his back, reaching inside in as obvious a manner as possible as he used his item box to pull out 3 bags worth of jewels. He handed over a bag and this is the gym I’ll be selling in large quantity, two-hundred and ninety seven gems.” This left him with thirty gems remaining, but he figured that selling them would be useful to push him over the edge in any future trade.

The jet merchant looked through them, his eyes gleaming with interest. “This is amazing! Are they all like…” The merchant cut himself off, looking at each of forty randomly selected gems from the three bags. After examining them each under a jeweler’s glass, he began to laugh. “Lad, I think we’re both going to make one another quite a bit of money today! I know exactly who to sell these to, a merchant that’s going south with the next caravan that’ll be bypassing Nashkel, and the two jewelry makers in this town. Why, if I do it up right, I can sell to both, without either of them knowing I’m doing it, so they won’t try to undercut me. I can give you four thousand, five hundred gold for it.”

Seeing that he could haggle, Harry did so for a time, and ended up bouncing the total to four thousand eight hundred, which would be enough carry them halfway to the full plate armor Harry had his eye on. It would have to wait until they came back this way though. “We have a deal. Two of us will go with you and your wounded men for now, then we can make the deal at your shop. If you could send your guard to find some of the Flaming Fists?”

The merchant nodded, and Imoen and Harry left with him, while Jaheira and Khalid stayed guard over Silk. Harry had seen the look in the married couple’s eyes and thought the two of them had some words they both needed to speak to one another after this incident.

When the two dimensional travelers came back, the married couple were looking much more sanguine. Officer Valerie was there too, questioning Garrick closely as he sat on the ground tied up. Silk was nowhere to be seen.

“Why is Garrick tied up?”

“Silk had one more Charm spell on one of her bracelets, and it hit him. He attacked us and we were forced to subdue him again,” Jaheira said, almost looking proud and for a moment Harry couldn’t figure out why before he saw her glance at Khalid. He then realized Khalid must have been able to resist it. “So, oh illustrious authority figure, what will you do with your money?”

“Set it aside. We’re not in desperate need of more supplies at this point, but we do have several more things at the Thunderhammer Smithy once we have enough of a war chest. That shadow armor and the poison dagger and the crossbow are just too good not to try to buy eventually, to say nothing of the full plate armor.”

“You know,” Imoen said in a low tone, looking at the other three, while Garrick was being questioned most strenuously by Valerie. “I could try to lift one of them. The Dagger at least.”

“Can you name one time that ever worked for you Imoen?” Harry asked with a laugh. “I remember your mentor despairing of teaching you how to pick pocket, let alone attempt to steal something out of a glass case in a busy room.”

“It wouldn’t be busy at night,” Imoen protested, although not very hard. It was true her actual pickpocketing skills were not very good in comparison to her general sneakiness.

“Smithy’s are always busy my dear,” Jaheira said dryly. “Especially ones as large as that. They’ll have commissioned work to work on at night, which can go on throughout the evening and well into the darkness with a team of blacksmiths taking turns. Besides which, I’m still of the opinion that we shouldn’t stay here over long.”

Harry sighed, shaking his head. “And here I was looking forward to cooking us a proper lunch today and maybe even a dinner…”

“L, l, let is not be hasty dear,” Khalid said quickly. “Aft, af, after all, there might be more clues to the Iron Intake Issue around here.”

“I am somewhat hungry,” Jaheira said slowly, staring at Harry, her eyes narrowed. “But do not think that I will always fall for this this blatant bribery.”

Harry nodded agreeably and led the way back to Landrin’s house. The meal he cooked up was magnificent, Seabass grilled with tomato, olives and basil, fresh bread bought in the town, and slices of cheese and a local meat that he had found in the town, cured and seasoned by Harry.

During the discussion, Harry told the married couple about the he’d used on the golem, and then asked the two Harpers more about bards, singers, Harpers and traveling the road in general. The two of them dominated the discussion, with Jaheira of course doing most of the talking, while Imoen was looking at the two older adventurers thoughtfully taking it all in.

However, despite Harry’s teasing and Imoen’s desire to stay here for the night, one meal was enough, and they had honestly not found anything more to do in this town that could be done without going out of their way. A few quests that were so minor that they would be able to saw them along the way perhaps, but nothing to stay here for. Not with more than half a day they could use to get a head start on the trip to Nashkel.

“Are you sure you won’t miss Valerie?” Imoen teased.

“No I won’t,” Harry said repressively, sending her a scowl while Khalid chuckled and Jaheira shook her head in exasperation. From the glimpses of the two she had gotten the evening before it was clear to her that Valerie had been doing most of the work in seducing Harry, rather than him showing much interest in her. *And she did ignore him earlier when she was questioning Garrick. That says much of the depth of her interest in Harry.*

So, soon after eating the four of them left Beregost, heading south. However, the day had one more twist to offer them.

As they were leaving, they were costed by a shout of, “Hello friends!”

As one they all turned and stared at Garrick, who had been waiting by the side of the road. Apparently for them, given how his face had lit up as he spotted them.

“What can we do for you this time Garrick?” Harry asked warily.

“No further damsels that aren’t exactly in distress that we’ll then have to flight I trust?” Jaheira added.

“No no,” Garrick said with a wan laugh. “None of that.” His laugh sort of trailed off after a few seconds. “Although it is sort of because of that that I am here. You see, I’m afraid that Lieutenant Valerie was not very, well, very sympathetic.”

Really Harry mused looking at him with a wry smirk. “I would’ve thought you’d be right up her alley, frankly.”

“I’m sorry what?” Garrick asked, looking confused.

“Nothing,” Harry said while the others laughed. “Nothing at all. What were you were saying?”

“Well yes, you see I’m well, a I’m a Bard, and to play in any town you have to get a permit, of course, and I did,” the young man added hastily but, “Lieutenant Valerie decided that with my association with Silk, that I am accountable for some of the damages. So either I stay and work to pay for the damages to the house that was damaged during the fight as well as enough money to help the families of the guards pay for more healing spells than Miss Jaheira used on them, or I leave immediately. And as you well know, it isn’t exactly good for a single sure on the road. I was, um, hoping that I could come with you,” He finished lamely.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. Garrick had done okay in the fight against Imoen it was true, and he remembered that bards were actually supposed to be able to use a few mage spells. *He could actually be useful without Charm clouding his senses.*

He looked at the others. Jaheira looked neutral, which probably meant she disapproved. Khalid simply nodded, indicating without words that he understood the youngster’s plight and sympathized. He also smiled at Garrick, perhaps feeling some fellow-feeling towards him for enduring Silk’s Charm spell together. Imoen simply grinned, giving Harry a thumbs-up, while surreptitiously looking at Garrick from head to toe.

That did not make Harry want him anymore in the party than he already did, but eventually, he sighed, and nodded. “Oh very well, if you want to come with us, come with us. But we will only take you on at on a trial basis until Nashkel. After that, if we’ve discovered were not compatible as a party, we can part ways amicably understood?”

Garrick nodded eagerly. “Thank you for this, friends!”

You have earned +200 Respect, +200 Trust with Garrick. You have 290/500 Trust, 310/500 Respect with Garrick. Garrick is now a Travelling Companion. Good grief, but that happened quickly didn’t it?

Harry groaned, internally shaking his head. A guy he just met was closer to becoming a friend then Jaheira. And yet at the same time, Harry realized that he approved more of the way Jaheira was all prickly to Garrick’s way over-the-top openness. *He’s like a strange mix between the Weasley twins, a used car salesman and Seamus with how he seems to be a little off-balance around the girls.*

With Garrick added to their party, the group moved on with Harry questioning Garrick closely about his equipment and spells. Learning that the man had skills in a longbow, Harry pulled out the fire arrows that they had taken from the kobolds days ago before pausing, looking over at Khalid. “Do you think he can join us in training at sword-fighting Khalid?” he asked the more experienced adventurer. “He’s apparently pretty decent, but there’s always room for improvement.”

Khalid nodded firmly. “Of c, c, course. I’d l, l, like to get a handle o, o, on his skills. Indeed, I thi, th, think he needs to show u, u, us his skill w, w, with the bow before you hand hi, hi, him those fire arrows Harry,” he said gesturing down to the quiver of fire arrows in his hand. Harry nodded, and slipped them back into his items space.

Garrick didn’t seem to notice anything unusual about that, for which Harry was thankful, since Jaheira was glaring at him now for trying to give away that secret again. He shrugged at her, gesturing to Garrick as if to say, ‘he didn’t notice’. She sighed and nodded, understanding the point, but not liking the fact that Harry still hadn’t gotten used to trying to hide that ability, which to her mind was more useful in many ways then his map ability.

As they continued walking, Garrick pulled out his balalaika, strumming the the strings. “I don’t suppose anyone would like a tune to while away the leagues?”

“Heck yes,” Imoen said with a laugh. “Give us some happy tunes, that’ll make this trip less boring.”

“In, in, indeed,” Khalid said with a chuckle. “Music will m, m, make the miles go f, f, faster.”

Harry shook his head, moving ahead of the others, the better to use his map ability, something he’d gotten into the habit of doing over the past few days. Jaheira joined him after a single song from Garrick, a love song it had been, about a young Swain wooing his love, which apparently was not to Jaheira’s taste.

Behind them, the man moved into a bawdy drinking song, and Jaheira sighed. Harry heard this and after hearing the first refrain of the song, he asked, “How long will it take us to get to Nashkel?”

“I think we should take the road at this point After all, shouldn’t we learn what dangers are on the road as well?” Jaheira said mock-brightly.

“I agree,” Harry said. The two of them looked at one another, an unspoken thought being shared between them. *Anything to get this journey over with as fast as possible!*

**OOOOOOO**

Determination deep within them, Jaheira and Harry drove the band hard that first day and then the next, keeping to the road all the while. No longer were they trying to stay out of sight. Rather, they were going for speed. But they could not go faster than Garrick’s songs, and the man could play as well on the march as standing still.

And yet as they took to the road, the two musical critics outside of his music didn’t really have any issue with Garrick as a companion, much to Harry’s annoyance. He had the skills of a Bard, and his skills with his voice and instrument were decent enough, it was just that his choice of the balalaika was not to Harry’s and Jaheira’s taste.

Jaheira was able to escape into the woods for the first two nights, which apparently was enough to give Khalid the idea that his wife didn’t like the music. After two nights of the emptied tent Khalid finally asked Garrick and in Imoen to tone it down. “Af, af, after all, if there are en, en, enemies about, your music will ca, ca, carry further then the sight of t, t, the campfire through th, th, these woodlands.”

And it was woodlands here once more. Oh, the road itself was decent, Imoen even said something about it almost looking like a Roman road after they had left Beregost, although that didn’t mean much to Harry who hadn’t studied much history in his old world, something he regretted since coming to this new world. But the forest was literally two feet away from the edge of the road with new growth, and beyond that deep forest. Despite having seen numerous cycles of civilizations try to tame it, the Sword Coast was still very wild, and with much more reluctance than many areas to give over its wild ways.

Beyond that, Garrick was decently intelligent, happy to help around the camp, and generally as nice as he first appeared, making Harry take back at least the used car salesman aspect of his first impression of the other young man. He and Imoen got along quite well, talking about this or that story, this or that song, types of drinks, and other such things. Luckily, Garrick stopped trying to flirt with Imoen within two days. After hours of being teased mercilessly and made so red as to resemble a tomato, Garrick had finally understood that when it came to flirting he was a novice, and Imoen was at least a journeyman if not a master.

“Or should that be mistress…” Harry said aloud later that night, cocking an eyebrow at Imoen later that night.

Imoen laughed, shaking her head. “What are you talking about?”

“Your flirting. You do know I get notices when you activate Flirty Little Lass right? So whenever you decided to to use your wiles on poor Garrick I knew about it. Not exactly fun, let me tell you.”

“My wiles?" Imoen said with a laugh. “God Harry, you do talk some rubbish sometimes don’t you? No one uses that word aloud like that.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “All right then, what would you call it?”

“Just flirting, or maybe using what my mom gave me,” Imoen replied with another little laugh. She flopped down on Harry’s bedroll next to him pulling him into a friendly hug. “Why?” she teased, whispering into his ear as Harry once more saw a notice that Imoen had activated her skill Flirty Little Lass. “Do you want some pointers?”

Harry dug his elbow into her side very lightly pushing her away then got his other hand up between them, and tickled her unmercifully, causing her to shriek and leap away. That was his new defense when Imoen got a little too into teasing him, the girl was ticklish as heck.

She escaped quickly, flopping back onto her own bedroll, turning to look at him with something like awe in her face. “Still, I have to admit to being jealous. Do you have any idea how many men and women would kill to be able to see real progress like that in terms of their relationships and everything else you described to be back in Candlekeep?” She shook her head. “You are one lucky little boy!”

“I’m not so little any longer,” Harry retorted with an eyeroll.

“I wouldn’t know. I’d have to ask that barmaid back in Candlekeep for that one wouldn’t I? Or maybe Phyldia?”

Shaking his head, Harry determinately looked away, ignoring his blush in order to try and change the direction of the discussion. “Speaking of flirting, are you actually interested in Garrick? I mean you have flirted with him occasionally, and he’s actually traveling with us so you could have an actual relationship unlike me and Valerie. So, I’d much rather you tell me out right if I will have to move out into the woods rather than me coming back to the tent one night to find the two of you snogging.”

Imoen burst out into laughter, rolling her around and slapping the ground next to her. “Garrick and me? God no. I flirt back with him ‘cause it’s fun to watch his attempts at coming off as suave and confident shatter like so much glass. He thinks he’s handsome and all that, but he really isn’t experienced with girls., certainly not as much as he tries to portray himself as. And he’s more than a little leery about me now, knowing that I have more experience than him.

She chuckled grimly, remembering a past relationship gone sour. “Although, he isn’t exactly alone. Lots of men prefer to have more experience and knowledge than the woman in the relationship.”

“Why?” Harry asked blinking in honest confusion, which Imoen found rather endearing. “I mean if the girl knows what she likes and doesn’t, then isn’t that a good thing?”

“You’d think so, but mainly it has to do with the male ego. A lot of men, especially in this day and age, don’t want to, shall we say, tread territory that was tread by others.”

“Then why are whores so popular? I mean we saw an entire quarter devoted to them back in Beregost.”

Imoen winced. They had, and had steered clear of it, although several of the courtesans had called out to Khalid and Harry. Which was undoubtedly the first time Harry had ever seen the darker side of his own gender’s need for sex. “I thought we were talking about relationships. Men go to whores if they want relationship sex,” she said bluntly. They don’t take a relationship the guy doesn’t need to take their emotions or even their pleasure into account. They just take cash, and that makes it perfect for a lot of men.”

“Ugh. No thank you. I’d like to think I have better control than that. And what’s sex without at least affection, if not love?” Harry said, scowling and shaking his head. He had created views on such things in his time during the tutorial, else he would have been able to go quite a bit farther than he had with the barmaid in Candlekeep.

“Good,” Imoen said with a laugh, patting his fight companionably. “If you liked that kind of thing, I’d probably have to smack you for it upside the head a few times. Although,” she teased if you want to go to say a courtesan at one point, to learn what you’ll be doing once the lights go out, that I could understand. It could even be called a rite of passage in this era.”

Harry winced, then surreptitiously looked around, breathing a sigh of relief as there was no quest statement appearing. “Oh thank goodness. Don’t do that to me girl!”

When she realized what had caused his sudden fear Imoen laughed again, and Harry growled at her pouncing and tickling her mercilessly, to the sound of shrieks of laughter.

Outside Garrick and Khalid and Jaheira all looked at one another. “Sounds like they’re having fun,” Garrick said, sounding a little wistful and a lot jealous.

Jaheira shrugged her shoulders. “Siblings often rough house like that, I understand.”

“Siblings?”

“Not my story to tell Garrick,” Jaheira said lightly, patting him like a child on the head. She rather liked the fact that she could call him child without any repercussions, her so-called agreement with Harry grated sometimes. *Even if he has shown an astonishing level of maturity and intelligence at times.* She looked back at the tent, rolling her eyes as she heard the faint sound of Imoen shouting about having gotten the upper hand. *Most of the time, at any rate.*

Early the next day, Harry was once more in front of the party, when he paused, frowning. Looking ahead of them it was a blue dot. But there were no red dots around, so he continued walking, until he could reasonably have been able to see the owner of the blue dot ahead of them. “Khalid, can I have your half-elf eyes up here for a moment?”

Khalid moved ahead of the others, where the three of them had been talking about what it was like down in the south, and if Khalid or Jaheira had ever spent time in Amn. Harry had taken part in the conversation at first, but when it became clear that they hadn’t spent much time in Nashkel or around the border between Amn and the Sword Coast, he had moved ahead of the others to use his map ability.

“What is it l, l, lad?” Khalid asked, looking ahead of them been blinking. “I, is tha, tha, that a young boy?”

“Indeed it is,” Harry said talking quietly so Garrick wouldn’t overhear. “I spotted him on my map, or I spotted the blue dot on my map, about ten minutes ago.”

“What is a b, b, boy doing out here?”

Harry shrugged. “Searching for something from the way he’s been moving around.”

The others joined them, and all of the others expressed some surprises well as they moved forward down the road towards the boy. He didn’t look up from what he was doing, searching around the bushes near to the road, scowling irritably.

“Correct me if I’m wrong but isn’t there a bandit problem around here?” Jaheira said tartly as soon as they were within hailing distance “What are you doing out of the alone, child?”

The boy, whose label read ‘Sam, farmer boy’ jumped, putting the bush between himself and them, looking like a frightened rabbit ready to run. “Nothin’! Nothin’ that needs done to deal with adventurers anyways. You just be about your business; I’ll be about mine.”

“you didn’t answer her question,” Harry said, smiling kindly of the young man. “And what are you looking for anyway?”

Staring from him to Jaheira and then back, he seemed to relax a little as he looked at Harry.

Charisma check passed. The young boy, Sam, thinks he can trust you, despite disdaining Adventurers normally.

“Just looking for a Bluebonnet, Mary Lou wanted one,” Sam said.

Garrick began to chuckle and moved forward, looking through the bushes, shaking his head. “I can tell you for certain that you won’t find it among them, bluebonnets grow underground trees not bought bushes.”

“What’s a Bluebonnet?” Harry asked out of the corner of his mouth.

“A very pretty flower, cheap, but extremely hard to find,” Garrick replied in a similar manner. “It’s the kind of thing that farm girls send out there young boys to find, to show how seriously they are taking their courtship.”

Jaheira sniffed obviously having overheard them thanks to her half-elf ears. “He’s putting his life on the line for something so, so silly?”

Harry shrugged. “That’s the aspect that I’m interested in too.” He raised his voice, and asked “But aren’t you worried about the bandits or other dangers Sam?”

Sam laughed. “Nah, I can run faster than them, besides, they wouldn’t be interested in me, I don’t carry iron.”

That caught their attention, and Harry quickly signaled Garrick to move forward with him. “How about this: you explain what you mean by that, and Garrick and I will help you find this Bluebonnet thing.”

“What does it look like?” he asked looking at Jaheira.

“I note you’re not asking me to help,” the druid replied with a smirk.

“He does find you scary,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“I am scary,” Jaheira said dryly. “To fools and idiots, and a boy who is willing to be out here with the current troubles is most decidedly an idiot.”

It turned out that Sam had actually seen the bandits in the area and had spied on them occasionally. According to Sam, he’d seen them let two large caravans which had been carrying food to the mining town of Nashkel go. But they had attacked an equally large caravan that was carrying iron.

“One with lots of guards and everything!” Sam exclaimed nodding his head sagely. “They attack anyone carrying iron, but let other people go. I’ve seen it dozens of times.”

At that point, Harry was able to find the Bluebonnet quickly thanks to his observation skill and the description given him by to Jaheira and he and Garrick returned to the others with Sam.

“Thanks Mister,” Sam said taking the Bluebonnet from him, and holding it critically. “Don’t see what’s so interesting ‘bout a flower, but then again I ain’t a girl.”

“No you ain’t” Harry said with a laugh, clapping Sam on his shoulder light. And isn’t that a good thing.”

“Too right!” The youngster said then looked at Harry speculatively. “You been asking a lot of questions about them bandits Mister.”

“I’m an adventure, and it our job to deal with that kind of thing,” Harry replied glibly, with Garrick nodding alongside him.

“I suppose,” the youngster said with a nod then looked at Harry again. “Ya helped me right quick, So I’ll tell you something for free. One time, when I was watching, the bandits, they attacked a large caravan and I’m tellin’ you, t’were the biggest I ever did see. The guards were good too, adventurers such as yourself one and all, and they couldn’t overcome ’em. They figured that out right quick, but then, as they were fight them, other bandits snuck in. I saw ‘em from the woods. Three bandits, all of them sneaking in like, like thieves. But instead of stealing anything or trying to get behind the guards, they snuck into the wagons, carrying someat. And when they came back out, they weren’t carrying it.”

He frowned at that, and nodded, pulling out twenty gold coins and showing them to Sam in his palm. “Tell me everything you can about the attack, from beginning to end.”

Later that day he and Garrick told the others about what Harry had learned. Which had been enough to give Harry another clue worthy of updating the Iron Intake Issue.

The Iron Intake Issue has been updated. You have found a clue pertaining to ‘Something wrong with the iron?

You know now for certain that something is happening even to the iron that has been successfully mined and shipped. This speaks of both organization and communication to know when it’s being shipped and the ability to get people into place to do something about it. This problem is much larger and much more convoluted than you anticipated, and it’s reach is growing.

Experience Bonus, +500 to all party members.

“The bandits attacked the camp right before they were able to set up defenses and were carrying some kind of substance in green vials. Sam didn’t see more than that, but they put the vials into the carts carrying the iron. Then at all of them retreated. The bandits took severe losses and the caravan went on its way with no one apparently the wiser. But I very much doubt that iron arrived without issue.”

“Alchemy, some foul concoction that rots the iron from within in some fashion,” Jaheira said with a scowl. “And for bandits to throw away their lives on a feint like that, it speaks of fear and power. A lot of both. This is becoming more complicated every time we learn more.”

Garrick looked at them all with interest, then grinned. “Well now, I know I’ve chosen an interesting group to join if you all are willing to look into the problem with the iron. Perhaps I will stay with you after we reach Nashkel, hmm?”

However, the group was soon to find another source of trouble appearing before them. Early the next day, Jaheira came back as the others were cleaning up after breakfast, smiling thinly. “I believe that we are within a day and a half at most of the outskirts of Nashkel. However,” she said gesturing up to the sky “it’s going to start raining soon. I’m afraid we will not be having a pleasant time of it once that occurs.”

“In other words cloaks on over your armor everybody,” Harry said with a wan laugh. “I don’t think any of us wants to deal with rust or anything of that nature, do we?”

True to Jaheira’s prediction, the rain started to come down to bear hour and a half after they started to move, making visibility difficult at any more than a few hundred yards in every direction. However, that didn’t stop Harry’s map ability, for which they were all very grateful by this point, even Garrick despite not knowing about it.

It was because of his map ability that Harry spotted trouble up ahead. “I’m starting to see red for dots folks,” he said, glaring ahead of him, hoping his voice would carry over the sound of the rain to the two half-elves behind him.

“How many?” Imoen shouted over the rain. The other two also moved closer with Garrick trailing at the back of the party.

“I don’t know, they’re moving around so much and overlapping too. More than twelve for certain, maybe as many as twenty or twenty-five.”

“That many?” Jaheira muttered, “Operating a bare day from Nashkel?”

“Are you sure we’re actually that close?” Harry asked, looking towards her while waving his hand I the air for Garrick to come closer.

Jaheira scowled, trying to picture in her mind what the area had looked like the last time she was here, and finding she couldn’t quite make the claim that she did in fact know where they were. “No,” she said after a moment, shaking her head. “We could still be as many as two days out going our normal speed.”

Garrick frowned, as he came close hearing that. “What’s going on?” he shouted, unable to use the map and not having the two half-elves hearing he had not heard Harry’s shout.

“I think there might be trouble up ahead,” Jaheira shouted, so loud that it all of them could hear her. Like his item box, Harry’s map ability was so good, they should probably try to keep it a secret for as long as possible. Even from Garrick, who had proven to be a decent sort after a very rocky start.

Imoen grumbled, then looked over to Khalid who was the closest of the two half-elves to her. “Do you have any idea what rain like this will do to my ability to Hide in Shadows?”

“So long as you d, d, don’t step into any puddles you sh, sh, should be fine,” Khalid shouted back.

The thief nodded and was about to move off when Harry grabbed her shoulder. “Hold on, they’re not here for us,” He said staring not at her, but at her his map, which he had enlarged, something he had learned to do since his leadership level had gone up.

“There is a blue dot in there, breaking out this way towards us. And one less red dot too.”

“Could they have been the same somehow?” Imoen asked.

But Harry quickly shook his head. “No, the blue dot intersected the red one as it was fleeing the rest and killed it. I can’t wait until my observe skill is able to give me more information from my map than this,” he muttered, to which Imoen simply nodded rueful agreement.

“What do you think we should do?” Jaheira asked, coming close enough now for Harry to make her out through the rain. The cloak she wore was matted to her body which could possibly have been sexy for both her and Imoen, if not for the fact that they both wore armor underneath, and, despite some of the comic books that Harry had seen in Dudley’s collection, for the most part armor on a woman, if it was actually any good, was not sexy. *All those comic books lied to me,* he thought idly with a chuckle to himself as he took in the two women, although calling them women at this point was being very gentle and generous. Bedraggled rats were more apt a description.

Harry however didn’t say so aloud, nor did he allow himself to think such thoughts that for very long, instead turning his attention back to his map, speaking low enough that Garrick could still not hear. The blue dot is coming this way, but the Reds are going to cut him off unless we do something, fast.”

“We don’t even know what we’re dealing with,” Jaheira protested, a but it was a very limp protest. Given how he was describing matters ahead of them, she thought this would be pointless but trying and failing would be better than not trying at all to save a life.

“We can’t try anything fancy and get there in time,” Harry said gesturing up into the rain and ahead of them to indicate the chase going on, not realizing how he took control now that there was combat in the offering. “Not without knowing what we’re dealing with, or anything about the terrain. But I don’t want to send Imoen forward. At the pace they’re going, they’ll be within hearing range of you two I think…”

He was stopped by Khalid holding up his hand. “I he, he, hear it, some kind of yipping n, n, noise over the rain. A, a, and bellowing. Lots o, o, of bellowing.”

Harry nodded, then made a quick, very dirty plan. “All right, Jaheira cast Treebark on me and Khalid. Garrick, you cast resist Fear just in case, I’ll call up Turn Undead if we are facing undead. Beyond that…” he scowled. The rain would make Garrick’s balalaika near to useless, and without it, he couldn’t use most of his spells. “Stick to arrows for now, don’t get in close unless you have to. You too Imoen, and Jaheira. Only Khalid and I have the armor to really stay in close against these numbers.” He smiled wanly. “Well, unless we’re facing kobolds or goblins anyway.”

With Garrick still protesting that he didn’t really understand what was going on Harry raced forward as fast as his feet could carry him, his shield up and ready, but most of his attention was on both his foot work and his map, watching until finally, he too began to hear the sound of yipping dogs of some kind.

The road flowed onto a large clearing that went from east to west following a river about three yards wide but possibly as much as two feet deep. There was a burnt out house to one side, the river was close to flooding its banks, but Harry could still see the bottom of it, right before he realized what they were up against.

On the far bank was all large band of about twenty dog men, which Harry recognized as gnolls. Their bestiary appeared in Harry’s vision for a brief blink, giving him some useful information but not enough to somehow turn this on its head.

Gnoll:

Gnolls are large chaotic evil creatures that closely resemble humanoid hyenas. They are found throughout the world. They have the strength of larger-than-average humans, but the constitution of hyenas, able to run men and horse down in short burst or continue to move with little food and drink for long periods of time. They are slow of limb, but use halberds and large numbers to overcome this, and there are those among them who have trained themselves to a greater degree.

Attitude toward Adventurers: While their leaders can be reasoned with and even make deals to help control their people’s natural aggression, the normal gnoll believes that most other people in the world would serve best by being either far away from gnoll territory – wherever a gnoll is – or dead.

Weaknesses: Like ogres they can be seen as more animalistic than truly thinking once a battle has begun. Fire can frighten them as it would a true hyena, and high pitched or just loud sounds can cause them to freeze. Once broken, it will take hours for a gnoll to regain control of himself. Their legs and knees in particular are vulnerable.

In among them, racing into the river was a human man, a large near-naked unarmed human man with what looked like a tattoo or large bruise on his face, a bald head dripping with the rain. He was covered with slowly bleeding wounds and was obviously in dire straits. He was also pulsing on Harry’s map now that he was close, and his observations skill told him who the man was.

Minsc, level 5 Ranger.

From the eastern steppes of Rasheman, the Ranger Minsc is a might warrior who, despite having a way with animals, also specializes in combat to a tremendous degree. He is monstrously strong, decently quick, and has incredible constitution, but has rather low wisdom, willpower and intelligence to pay for it.

Minsc is in a Berserk state and will barely be able to tell friend from foe. Though, he won’t feel his wounds either, not unless he loses a limb or is on death’s door.

The word Berserker was pulsing in red letters. Harry hadn’t heard of that status change before, but he could tell what it meant thanks to his higher ability with observation.

At first the gnolls and the man didn’t notice his arrival, or that of his friends as they came down the road behind him, and Harry knew he couldn’t let this chance go. “Spread out!” Harry shouted, use the advantage of the river to to keep them at range. Jaheira, see if you can Summon Animals over on the other side of the river, break up their numbers. Garrick, Imoen, target a single gnoll each, kill him then move on. Jaheira, after you use that spell as often as you can, concentrate on picking off wounded and supporting Khalid and me. Khalid, let me get stuck in first, then guard my back and that big guy!”

With that, Harry had given his last order and he raced forward, crashing into the water and shouting “Big guy! Catch!” at the top of his lungs as he pulled out one of his spare swords, tossing it through the air aiming above the man’s head.

His throw went lower than Harry had hoped, but the man had seen the sword flashing through the rain, which was now slowly starting to peter out. He reached up with both hands, and caught it, by its handlebars, before grabbing it in one hand, and slaying the first gnoll that came at him.

The gnolls were armed with pikes, and the nearest to their victim thrust forward at the man just a second too late. Minsc bellowed something in some foreign language, smashing the haft of a halberd to one side, then lashing out with a lightning quick strike that cut that gnoll in twain.

Harry watched that for a brief second then he was dashing forward and guarding the man’s back from a halberd strike that would have torn him into his side.

He had almost forgotten to reequip a weapon, but then, his trusty backup warhammer was back into his hand, and he twirled it, smashing it not into the gnoll that had attacked the man, but into the gnoll’s weapon, smashing it into pieces. The gnoll fell back, then died as the man took him in the throat with a sword thrust, roaring in fury.

A second later seven more Gnolls were on them, striking with their blades and shafts. Harry blocked dodged and smashed, slamming his warhammer into anything that offered a target, kneecaps, faces, chests, arms weapons, even the halberd heads occasionally. His tower shield moved wildly, and Harry was grateful that he had followed Khalid’s advice and put his skill slot point from leveling up back in of the Friendly Arm Inn into sword and shield. That gave him the Max skill he could in it as a paladin, but the automatic nature of that defense was serving him well now.

Elsewhere, Imoen had hissed angrily, roaring, “How am I supposed to backstab ever supposed to stay on this side of the river, stupid Harry!”

“Shut up and fire as he told you too!” Jaheira shouted, turning words into action. Her fingers moved in a wild dance as she shouted out, “Summon Animal!”

Jaheira has used the druid spell Summon Animal. This spell summons an animal from the nearest forest, the size and number of animals summoned being effected by the level of the summoner.

A second later an animal, in this case a tiger, appeared. For a second it stood blinking. Normally this was where Jaheira would have to take a second to mentally befriend (or dominate, it varied) the animal. But since the animal appeared in among a group of gnolls attempting to enter the river downstream from Harry and the unknown, it came under immediate attack, and responded appropriately.

Two of them fell to its fangs and claws before it was harmed, and then it was really going to town as the gnolls tried to fall back, using their long halberds to their advantage. Another spell, another animal, this time a wolf, joined in. Then Jaheira turned her attention to her sling. Her sling stones flew rapidly, the half-elf barely bothering to aim. She was looking to disrupt the attack on the other side of the river, not score outright kills.

At her side Imoen and Garrick started to fire their bows, Imoen’s Short Bow +1 now proving it’s worth, each shot going home. But the gnolls, for all their animal features, wore chest plates like Harry’s or at the least chain mail, and her shots weren’t the instant kills they should have been. Garrick’s composite long bow – which he’d had before he had joined them - proved a little better in that area, but his own shots sometimes missed their targets due to the tumult of battle.

Khalid had reached the two beleaguered warriors on the other side of the stream by this point and shouted a warcry in Elven. The gnolls that had surrounded the two warriors turned, but before they could, his sword took one of them in the back. If he’d had Backstab like Harry or Imoen, that attack would’ve killed that gnoll instantly. As it was, the gnoll screamed in pain, and stumbled forward, wrenching himself off of Khalid’s weapon while two more swung their halberds at him.

He raised his shield, taking both blows on the plus shield mediums shield +1 that he had been given by Harry back in Beregost. His sword then flicked out, not up or straight, but down, stabbing one gnoll in the foot through the water, causing him to yowl in pain, and back away, allowing Khalid to push up with his shield. Using his skill Shield Bash he smashed the other gnoll’s weapon out of his way. Two swift strikes with his sword, and both of them fell, gurgling their life’s blood away, their throats cut neatly.

Then he was standing with Harry back to back, trying to protect the Berserker at the same time.

The spell on Harry had faded, and he had taken three hits by this point from the halberds of the gnolls despite everything his shield and sword ability could do, and his chest plate was torn through in two places. Even his helmet had been sliced into from one side, the blow leaving a long gash on his chin and jaw. That had probably protected them from a killing blow.

But even so, they were in dire straits. Despite the arrows raining in from the other side of the river, there were more and more gnolls piling into the three warriors. Harry fell back a step slamming a halberd to one side with his warhammer and then circling around another gnoll, his tower shield, a battering ram to slam one gnoll into a second, using them to guard himself from several more. He was able to turn and glance to the side, noticing the total battle.

Counting quickly he saw about twenty two gnolls still alive and in fighting shape, with ten dead and at least seven wounded. But the Berserker was flagging, and as Harry looked around, he saw Garrick run out of arrows and Khalid take a blow to the side that got through his Barkskin. The two summoned animals were both dead as well, and more of the gnolls were moving to surround the three warriors in the stream. Five of them were even moving across the stream to attack the archers.

“Imoen or Garrick, cast a spell that’ll push them away from us to the south! Jaheira, Tangling Vines or something to the west” Harry shouted.

Garrick hesitated but Imoen did not, shouting out, “DUCK! *Expeliarmus*!” With her spell’s effect somewhat shaped by her visualization the flash of energy blasted out, picking up the gnolls on that side of the battle and hurling them sideways into their fellows messing up the gnolls attacking Harry and the other two warriors. The other side had been badly depleted by Jaheira’s summons and were slow to move forward.

This let Harry take the next step in his plan to regroup. Standing upright from where he’d crouched, he shouted, “*Protego*!” while flinging both arms wide. The shimmering blue wall of magical energy appeared, spreading out from in front of him to cover all three of the somewhat scattered warriors with a shield from all three directions, backing away into the middle of the stream.

Gasping, Harry shook his head, feeling his health points deplete at about twice the rate they should have for that spell. Still it was working, shown by the gnolls in front of them bashing away at the shield ineffectively.

“H, ho, how long can you ke, ke, keep this up?” Khalid asked, stabbing his blade into the ground of the river for a moment, shaking out one leg and wincing. He’d taken another shot from the butt end of a halberd there before Imoen’s spells had done their work.

“I don’t know I’ve never tested to destruction. Especially not with someone inside, trying to hack his way out,” Harry said, looking exasperated as he saw that Minsc, in his berserk state, was trying to do just that. *I thought he was running away before this, but it’s like with a sword in his hand he’s stopped being able to think of anything but killing the enemy.*

“J, j, just be thankful that he doesn’t think that you meant to attack him with this Khalid said, examining the naked man and from this close finally was able to the whole package. Because this guy was huge. So large, that Harry felt that he might be as tall as Hagrid back in his old life, although he wasn’t quite as broad across the shoulders. *And then there’s the tattoos, the lack of all hair and, oh yes, the murderous fury with which he’s battering against my shield trying to get at the small company of gnolls attempting to kill us.*

Harry then felt one of Jaheira’s healing spells hit him and nodded towards her gratefully from where she was moving toward them through the water. Strangely enough the gnolls weren’t doing much on their end except trying to break through the shield, so the other two were still safe on the far bank. “So you’re saying he won’t be able to think of running away?” Harry asked.

“No, he, he, he’ll only see the e, en, enemy. We can probably wa, wa, wait i out, I think the ber, be, berserk state only lasts for an hour.”

Just then a crack appeared in the shield, and Harry winced. “Well I can keep casting shield, but I doubt I’ll be able to fight afterward, even with Jaheira’s spells keeping me alive. And even worse, they have reinforcements incoming.”

More Gnolls were appearing at on the edge of Harry’s map, and he shook his head. “We can’t stay here, we either need to finish these Gnolls and then retreat or knock that guy out and retreat.”

Khalid winced. Att, att, attacking him would n, n, not be a good idea. Kno, kn, knocking a Berserker out, that’s j, j, just not happening. And I do, do, don’t see this number of gno, gno, gnolls retreating.”

“Then we’ll have to kill them all,” Harry said. “Do you think he can put on armor? I’ve got us a few spare leather armors and leggings at least.” He stopped as Khalid shook his head again.

At that moment Imoen and Garrick reached them then, with Imoen glaring at him. “That was the most idiotic thing I’ve ever seen, just, just charging forward like that.” But then her eyes strayed to the man, she whistled. “He’s a big one,” she said admiringly.

“Well if I hadn’t been the most idiotic thing you’d ever seen, he’d be a dead big thing, and it isn’t like I didn’t plan as much as I could, there’s just something not be said for facing more than six times your own numbers, you know,” Harry replied dryly.

Jaheira finally pushed her way through the water behind Garrick and Imoen, staring upwards as the shield started to collapse. “This rain is nearly gone,” she reported. “That means we can try the same old trick of lighting my Tangling Vines spell on fire. I’m afraid I’m out of Barkskin and call animal spells, however. I am also down to three Cure Minor Wounds and one Cure Serious Wounds.” She looked at the large, almost naked man with pity in her eyes. “And none of my spells could break him out of his Berserk stats.

“Um, well if the rain lets up I can start using my songs, but I’ve only got two Agannazar’s Scorcher Spells. Oh, and one Armor spell, but I can’t use it one someone else, only myself. My Songs though, they might make a difference. I have ones that can heighten speed and healing too. Um… well I suppose now would be a bad time to ask right,” Garrick mumbled the last to himself, before nodding resolutely, casting fearful glances towards the company of gnolls trying to shatter Harry’s shield. “Right.”

Harry waited a moment expecting to hear Imoen say something, but you didn’t say anything, causing Harry to turn his head just slightly to stare at her. To his chagrin, she was staring at the naked man too, but instead of Jaheira’s pity. Instead she had a weird grin on her face. “MMM, all those muschles yum, Imoen likey. It’s like Charlie and Hagrid had a love child!”

“Imoen how is it that you can both freak me out and put the most disturbing image in my head when we are more than likely about to face the toughest fight we’ve faced yet?” Harry said, with a scowl. Jaheira could you smack her upside the head for me?”

“Gladly,” the druids said, smacking her so hard upside the head of that Harry actually noticed that she lost two hit points.

“OW, bitch what was that for?!”

“You can ogle the poor man after the fight is over child, concentrate now please,” Jaheira said tartly.

Meanwhile, the reinforcement for the gnolls had arrived. This meant that all of the earlier losses they had sustained had been made good. There were at least forty gnolls now, spread out, some of them actually forming into a strange looking line of soldiers, their halberd’s all pointed forward as they waited to charge forward towards the beleaguered adventurers in the river.

And as Harry watched, 10 more red dots appeared at the outskirts of his range, moving towards them. “This just keeps getting better and better,” he muttered, shaking his head thinking quickly. *Tactics don’t fail me now.*

“Jaheira, stay to the middle of the river, the gnolls don’t seem able to move through the water as well as we do. Stay out of their range of those halberd’s entirely, if you have to retreat to the other side of the riverbank, do it. They don’t have any long-range shooters, and I don’t see any spellcasters among them either. Cast that Tangling Vine spell of yours to our right, that should help guard the big guy’s flank. Garrick, you stay back and start lobbing fire arrows into the mass of that is caught by the Tangling Vines.”

“When you have set the Tangling Vines on fire, move on and cast again on the other side of the line. Try to keep them from surrounding us, but if the choice is between catching us and not catching a lot of them, do it.”

Jaheira nodded, but she was glancing up at the sky which had cleared up by this point. “I don’t know if that attack is going to work, it’s a little too wet.”

“Against these numbers I will take whatever I can get,” Harry said sternly. He turned to Imoen. “Imoen, you and I will cast our Blood Mage spells right into that mass of more organized troops that just showed up. They’re the center of the line, and if we break them, the Berserker, Khalid and I can charge forward, grab their attention and pull it back down on us.”

Becoming serious instantly, Imoen nodded. “What spell?”

“How destructive can you make a *Bombarda* spell?”

“Pretty damn instructive Harry,” Imoen muttered.

That had been one of Jaheira’s suggestions after they had fought the wolves and the ogre. She knew that some Sorcerers could overpower spells, and given their innate understanding of magic, the Blood Mage spells Harry and Imoen could use were close to that school of magic. Indeed, it was what Harry had done a moment ago to his shield spell.

“Imoen, once we finish casting, use Hide in Shadows. Try to flank any of the Gnoll Elites that you can see with long range fire. Do not get close unless you have to.”

Among the Gnolls now attacking Harry’s shield, were the ten slightly pulsing red dots Harry had seen Earlier. They were reading to his AA skill senses as:

Gnoll Elites. The second level of the common Gnoll Warrior.

With more HP, greater speed and dexterity, these gnolls have proven themselves above the common Warrior stock. They might still have some of the same weaknesses as their fellows, but they are simply tougher all around. They might use the same halberds, but their plate mail tends to be of better quality, and they are far more experienced and trained.

Before Harry could read further Imoen interrupted his thinking with a shout. “Shit, the shields breaking!”

Harry nodded, and moved to face it seeing those same Elites directing groups of gnolls to hit separate parts of the shield in a rhythm.

Fine, ready Harry said to Imoen, with the others behind him. On either side of the Berserker. Thankfully he hadn’t started attacking them, instead he had stopped attacking the shield, and now stood, breath heaving. Harry frowned for a moment then decided not to change to one of his other spare swords, the warhammer seemed to be working just as well, and Harry was unwilling to mess with the something that was working.

Instead he summoned a second sword from his item box and held it out to the Berserker, fearing the one he’d given him earlier would break soon given how hard the man was on it. The Berserker grabbed it up, and held both swords one in each huge hand, making them look like short swords almost, and Harry wondered if he actually had any skill in dual wielding.

He had to put that thought aside though as the shield came down. As it did, he and Imoen cast as one. “*Bombarda*!” An instant later they both groaned, and Harry’s head started to pound. Harry noticed both of them were in the orange on their health bar now, with him close to the red, and Imoen right at the top of the orange.

The spells flashed forward into the mass of the gnolls in the center of the enemies, as they had begun to charge forward. The spells struck, and it was as if kegs of dynamite had gone off in the center of the gnolls. Body parts and gnolls flew everywhere, the front line and most of the second just disintegrating in front of the adventurers as fourteen gnolls instantly disappeared from Harry’s map, with four of the warriors being so badly hurt they panicked, turning to run away.

At the same time, Jaheira had been casting Tangling Vines on one aspect of the line. She caught four Gnolls spell, then twisted around, and cast again on the other side of the line, catching only two this time. None of the caught gnolls panicked though the entire group of the doglike sub-sentients had recoiled from the dual spells, letting her catch just a two more.

At the same time, the large man named Minsc (although Harry couldn’t’ tell anyone that just yet) had charged forward, and Khalid and Harry charged, on his heels. By the time the gnolls had recovered, the three warriors were in their faces, and Harry’s hammer flashed out, smashing into a dazed gnoll in the head, pulping it, then around into the side of another one. Imoen moved with them, ignoring Harry’s earlier orders to start using Hide in Shadows instantly, conjuring up a Lacero instead, and lashing out in either direction to protect their backs

Imoen has used fire whip. -10 to health.

Imoen’s Would-be Dominatrix skill has activated. This will add half again as much damage to any attack with her whip.

Other than noting he had forgotten to look at Imoen’s learned skills the last time they had compared stats, Harry ignored the message and any others he saw about flank attacks, critical hits or damage taken, dodging this way and that as the gnolls finally started to recover, their halberd’s flashing forward. Only one of the higher-level gnolls had died in the initial bombardment spells, and the remaining nine started barking orders in their strange doglike tongue, reorganizing the warriors around.

Khalid was the first one to meet one of the Elites face-to-face, and nearly paid for with his life. The halberd of the enemy warrior shifted its aim slightly as another two gnolls attacked his shield, keeping it in position while the halberd of the Elite dove straight over his shield, right towards his chest.

But, Khalid was the only one who wore full plate mail, and he twisted aside just enough for the halberd to score a glancing blow along it, creating a large dent but not penetrating. He then twisted around, bringing his shield up into the gnoll’s center, and activated Shield Bash. The successfully executed skill blow smashed the gnoll off its feet, where the Berserker stopped on its head with a foot, crushing it with a show of power that took several of the surrounding gnolls aback.

He even roared out a battle cry, the first actual words that Harry had heard Minsc say. “Butt kicking for goodness!”

With that he hurled his second sword into the face of another gnoll, then chopped that gnoll down when he tried to block the thrown sword with his halberd.

*Guess that answers my question about dual wielding,* Harry thought as he twisted around behind the big guy, using his tower shield to block one, then two, then a third blow, thanking all the heavens that he had the foresight to buy the Tower Shield +1 back in the Friendly Arm Inn. It’s durability was slowly degrading in this fight, occasionally after a particularly strong swing, but like in the earlier portion of the melee, the tower shield and his Sword and Shield skill was proving its weight in gold.

Elsewhere, Garrick had fired his fire arrows that Harry had handed him into the mass of Tangling Vines, which had lit on fire fitfully here and there. Thankfully however, the regular Gnolls were susceptible to panic at a fire, just as any wild animal would be. So while not a lot of them had actually been set on fire, most of those trapped had begun to panic, no longer taking part in the battle.

This left only about around seventeen Gnolls facing Harry and his fellows in close combat along with eight Elites. But that was more than enough.

Khalid gasped as a halberd took him low in the leg, smashing into his greave, the greave stopping the halberd from cutting his leg off. The blow still broke bone though sending into the ground. Jaheira instantly cut off the spell that she had been about to perform, another Tangling Vines, spell, and centering her eyes on him began to cast a Cure Minor Wounds.

But even as she did, Jaheira despaired, knowing she wouldn’t be fast enough to protect Khalid from the downward flashing blades of the gnolls surrounding him. He hacked at one of their feet, causing him to yet painfully and back away, but the other two, both Elites swung their halberd’s down aiming for his chest and head.

Harry desperately cast a Reducto spell, catching both of them in one blast, sending their bodies falling backwards, their weapons and upper bodies both cut in twain, then, his head seriously frowning and a warning about his health appearing in his vision, he twisted around, barely getting his shield up to block a blow it would’ve taken his head off. Another blow came into his side and he couldn’t move his hammer fast enough to take it on its shaft. The blow crunched into his side armor, denting it badly and breaking at least a rib or two. “God damn it, what is with my ribs being everyone’s favorite freaking target!?”

Another blow came in over the top of his tower shield, as it was engaged with the first attacker, one of the Elites having aimed his weapon at just the right time. The blow smashed into Harry’s helmet, and he saw stars, stumbling backwards.

The Berserker too was taking a hammering. Since the shield came down he had been hit at least three, maybe four times, and Harry knew that his health had begun to fall precipitously. Or at least he supposed that was the case since his name was now flaring red and black over his head.

Imoen had been forced to back away into the stream herself, having killed five gnolls with her fire whip, before nearly losing an arm to another Elite. She was now bleeding profusely into the water, her arm useless, cursing the fact that she couldn’t use her other arm at all well with any weapon. Jaheira however turned to her, healing her quickly, then turned back towards Harry, as Khalid pushed himself to his feet, healing him in turn. Khalid was still badly wounded, but his bones were broken anymore at least.

“I’m down to one healing spells, now!”

“Garrick!” Harry roared. “Now’s the time for those spells of yours!”

“OH, great gods of Light~~, bless us with good he~alth~~~!!” Garrick belted out, strumming his balalaika to a deliberate short tune. A wave of green energy splashed out from him, impacting Imoen, Jaheira and the others as he pointed the head of his instrument at them one after another.

Garrick has used Song of Regeneration.

A spell calling on the god of bards and travelers, this spell creates a healing aura among those targeted, healing one hit point every few seconds. Both the amount regenerated per person and the speed can be modified as the user gains levels.

+1 to health every three seconds.

Even as Harry and the others started to feel their health slowly regenerate, Harry felt another blow land on the back of his helmet, but he had felt it coming and ducked forward. Instead of smashing into the back of his helmet with enough force to possibly crack skull underneath, it simply smashed the helmet off his head, and Harry turned, bringing his hammer into the side of the gnoll Elite that had been about to kill him. The gnoll groaned in pain as its ribs gave way, but grabbed Harry’s outstretched arm, before an arrow from Imoen slammed into the back of his head, Flank Attack doing it’s work.

Shaking his head, Harry took in the total battle in a brief lull before shouting, “Garrick, those Scorcher spells, use them on the right then switch to swords and get to the berserker. Imoen go with him but keep an eye on Jaheira we’ll need our healer still. I’ve got Khalid!”

“Right!” Garrick started to intone the spells and an instant later the spells flashed out one after another, bright tongues of flame much like that of a flamethrower only far narrower in diameter. Three more gnolls screamed and started to flee as the spell lit up the four gnolls still trapped on that side of the battlefield. Unable to escape they started to burn, their screams causing many of the other gnolls to start acting more wildly, angry and fearful at the noises of agony coming from their fellows.

With that done, Garrick put his balalaika on his back, the spell keeping the strings moving as he charged forward, pulling out his short sword as he went. Imoen went with him, disappearing into Hide in Shadows. Two gnolls turned to him, and Garrick engaged them, ducking under one blow from a halberd, and then twisting around another, using his shield to push it out of position to stab with his short sword.

His short sword was dodged just enough to avoid the tip, however, that had pushed that gnoll out of position to defend the back of his fellow. Imoen appeared there, stabbing viciously, then turning, and cutting at the first gnoll’s leg. He couldn’t defend himself, and it hit, then Garrick was there, stabbing up into his face.

Minsc howled in triumph as he killed another gnoll, then turned, gasping as a halberd blade stabbed into his chest. He had dodged just enough that it hadn’t gone completely through him, but it still stabbed deep, and at last his vitality started to fade. Yet even as his feet faltered under him, the mighty Ranger still grabbed the shaft, and stabbed forward, taking the gnoll Elite at the other end, stabbing through his mouth into his brain.

Then he began to collapse, but Jaheira was already casting another healing spell on him, as Imoen and Garrick tried to close in, protecting his down body. Harry and Khalid fought through two more warriors to meet up with them, and the four of them became a shield around the downed warriors body.

All of them were battered and bleeding. Even Garrick had taken a hit and was wincing, favoring one leg. Harry’s side and head were aflame in pain, Jaheira not having another medium healing spell able to heal his broken ribs. Indeed, she was out of spells now and was down to lobbing sling stones. Facing them were still seven gnoll warriors and five Elites.

It was as if both sides knew that this was the last last gasp, because even as Minsc slowly pushed himself to his feet, the battle reached a brand new crescendo, the Elites pushing the remaining warriors, who were looking very nervous, into the fight with roars and growls. Halberds flashed forward, swords sliced, and the sound of battle rose again, with the Elite’s constant roar a backdrop behind everything.

A second later after Harry had downed another warrior with a blow to its kneecap, a halberd sliced in over his shield. Harry flinched back, which protected the top of his head from being sliced off, but the ragged tip of the halberd still sliced across his forehead, and suddenly, Harry’s world disappeared into red as his blood flowed down his face into his eyes.

He backed away as he a message appeared in front of his eyes.

Head wound! Wow, does that bleed or what? You are blinded.

Harry desperately tried to defend himself, but unable to see, seemed to mean that his shields automatic shield block didn’t work either.

Another blow came in, luckily turning on his now-ragged chest plate before Khalid, Garrick and Imoen could pull him away. Soon Garrick’s slow healing spell did it’s work, and Harry wiped away the blood, his shield instantly flashing up to block a blow that would have caught Khalid in the side.

In a moment of vicious irony just as Harry was back in the fight thanks to his spell, Garrick went down a second later, gasping as a halberd’s shaft, it’s head cut off a second ago, slammed into his chest just above his groin, actually hurling him backwards to land in a small bundle of agony.

Another warrior tried to bring down his halberd blade on the downed bard. But Minsc was back up on his feet and charged, slamming into the thing bodily shouting, “For my witch, for goodness!”

He had lost his weapon, in the skull of his last victim, but he bore this creature down, a blow to the face actually pulping the thing like one of Harry’s hammer blows. He then wrenched the halberd out of the gnoll’s dead grip twirling around to slam the end of the shaft into one warrior, then cutting into a second.

“Thank you for your help good friends!” the Ranger shouted. Harry realized with a start that the earlier wound had apparently been harsh enough to knock him out of his berserk state.

Next it was Khalid who cried out in pain, a halberd cutting into his shoulder from one of the elites. But this opened the Elite up to a wild blow from Harry which shattered the side of his head.

The last Elite might have gotten him in turn, but then Jaheira was there her staff lashing out with all the force of a tree falling. The blow lifted the Elite and hurled him to splash down into the river.

That broke the last gnoll warriors, and they turned to flee, but Jaheira and Imoen weren’t having any of that. As they turned and ran the two of them took them under fire. The last gnoll fell with one of Imoen’s arrows in the back and it’s skull smashed by one of Jaheira’s sling stones.

It was just as well they’d broken though, Harry realized dimly as his hammer dropped with a splash into the water from his nerveless grip. All of them but Jaheira, who had stayed behind the rest of them and whose spells were the only reason they were all still alive, had been battered near to near collapse by this point. For a moment, all was still, as Harry stared around them, exhaustion clear on his face, so tired he couldn’t even lean down to try and find his hammer now that the adrenaline was starting to leave him. He unequipped his shield, stowing it in his item box, and fell to his knees in the water, gasping. He found the hammer then, and made it disappear too, before he plunged his head into the water and gasped in relief as the water flowed over his head.

Next to him, the big guy stayed taught and ready for a moment, staring all around him, then being to smile down at Harry and around at the others. The might Ranger Minsc thanks you for your help stranger, but I think,” he began to sway on his feet as his eyes started to close. “It is time for all those good and righteous to rest.”

Like a mighty oak, he fell backwards, splashing into the river soaking Harry and the nearby Garrick and Harry chuckled wanly, lifting a tired hand to wipe away the water from his face. “Well, that’s one way to make an exit.”

Standing up and grabbing the big guys shoulder, Harry began to pull him back to the riverbed, met halfway by Khalid, who, with his one remaining working arm – the other shoulder having been broken along with the shoulder plate of his armor - helped Harry get Minsc up onto the bank. “All those in favor of making camp right here say aye,” Harry muttered, shaking his head.

All of the others nodded tired agreement, taking stock slowly. Garrick was the worst off, though not by much. He’d lost his sword on the other side of the river or it had simply shattered no one was sure which. He was still in quite a lot of pain and not answering any questions yet, and unfortunately his falling into the river had halted Garrick’s regeneration spell. Khalid had a broken shoulder and was limping despite his thigh bone having been healed from his earlier wound. And both Imoen and Harry, while looking better than the others for the most part, were in the red in health thanks to their Blood Mage spells.

Imoen was worse off despite Harry having several broken ribs making every move agony, because he had much more health than Imoen. She was now shivering in place, her skin clammy to the touch as Jaheira put her arms around the younger woman and slowly led her after the others, starting to drag her as Imoen’s adrenaline left her.

All of her spells were spent, her mana horribly depleted but of all of them, only Jaheira was physically fine. Once she got Imoen ashore she began to bustle around creating a fire, while Khalid and Harry moved the big guy over to it, slowly laying him down the ground, before moving to do the same with Imoen. Harry bundled her into her sleeping bag, then piled his own on top, figuring that being warm would help, before cursing himself for a fool.

“And why for are you doing that?” Jaheira said instantly interrupting him.

“Back in the Friendly Arm Inn, I could’ve bought some healing spell potions I mean.”

“Yes, you could have,” she said, but unlike Harry’s tone, hers was not at all condemning. “Yet did it occur to you at the time?”

“No,” Harry said shaking his head. In fact, the fact that the priest is had healing spells hadn’t even registered until several days later when he found the empty vial of the minor healing potion he’d found in Candlekeep.

“Exactly. Hindsight is always more destructive than helpful at times like this Harry, and, while healing spells might help Imoen, so too will rest and food. Did we do everything right here? Perhaps not, although I would contend we did the best we could. Could we have done everything right for ourselves and still saved Minsc, again no. We won, we succeeded in defending him, and we slaughtered a band of gnolls many times our number, a feat that is an extremely impressive considering that we didn’t have any time to prepare. Learn from this later, when you are not feeling guilty about all of us being hurt during an adventure we chose to go on. Do not beat yourself up over it,” she ordered.

“Yes ma’am,” Harry said, smirking.

She glared at him. “Let us put the phrase ma’am under the same heading as ‘Grandmother’ shall we? Other without wise I will start calling you impertinent youngling.”

“Was that the best you could come up with?” Harry asked, smiling at her as Khalid chuckled from where he was now helping Garrick along.

“I’m tired, so you’ll forgive me from not giving you my best material,” Jaheira said tartly.

Khalid chuckled once more, slumping down next to her. “W, w, we probably should m, m, move away from the battlefield. T, t, this ma, many bodies will no d, d, doubt draw animals.”

Jaheira shook her head, gesturing down to Imoen and Minsc. We can’t move them. The big one, he is barely clinging to life.

“He said his name was Minsc,” Harry supplied.

“Minsc then is barely clinging to life, and it is only because of the added durability that the berserk state gave him that he is still alive at all. And Imoen, her spell usage sucked out all of her vitality. Until I am able to cast a few healing spells on her, I refuse to move her.” Jaheira said firmly, almost glaring at her husband.

“B, b, but,” Khalid said calmly, only quailing slightly under her gaze. “th, tha, that doesn’t change the facts th, th, that this b, b, battle will attract both an, an, animals, and other demi-hu, hu, humans. None of us a, a, are in a fit st, st, stage to fight back.”

Harry made an executive decision and stood up from beside Imoen. “How much do you think that Minsc weighs?”

Frowning at the apparent non-sequitur, Khalid shrugged. “Thr, thr, three hundred pounds t, t, two hundred p, p, pounds something like th, th, that. W, w, why?”

Harry nodded slowly, then said “I think, well I have to wonder if I’ll be able to put them in my item box.”

The now aware – if barely - Garrick, Khalid and Jaheira all stared at him and he shrugged. “I don’t think I’d be able to do it if they were conscious, able to fight the effects, but like this? It’s possible. And Khalid’s got a point Jaheira, none of us are in a fit state to fight besides yourself. I’m not saying you couldn’t guard us, but then you wouldn’t be able to get any sleep, and we’ll need your healing spells tomorrow.”

Khalid nodded, glancing at his own health bar which adventurers could see, pretty much like Harry, although they couldn’t see the status bars of anyone else. “I f, fu, fully agree wit, wi, with that.”

“…Very well,” Jaheira said. “Let us get some food into them both, soup and broth I believe, they’ll be able to keep it down, while I dress the big fellow’s wounds.”

Minsc, Harry replied again.

Jaheira shrugged. “Big guy is more descriptive.”

Khalid chuckled at that, and Harry pulled out more bandages and wraps, something he had thought of buying back in the Friendly Arm Inn, and then again in Beregost. He gave them to Jaheira and as she went to work on that, started to make some soup and sandwiches for those who could chew at present.

About an hour and a half later, Jaheira finally agreed to move, and Harry doused the fire with a helmet full of water from the stream, then moved first to Minsc, reaching down and activating his item box at the same time as he was touching. There was a moment of wrenching disjointedness, where Harry instinctively knew if he had tried this on someone conscious, the individual could have fought him. But Minsc was not conscious, and Harry was able to see his body disappear into his item box, shown in front of his eyes by a small doll-like picture.

He then moved over to Imoen, where he touched her forehead, gently stroking her hair back for a second, before doing the same thing. The added weight of the two of them made a warning pop-up.

Warning, your item box is at full capacity. Anymore, and you will become encumbered.

Meanwhile Garrick, who despite limping and holding his crotch occasionally, was in decent shape, had moved back over the river and looted the bodies, cutting off ears as he went. The bounty for Gnolls was for 75 each, which meant this fight could add quite a bit to their stores. But soon enough, they were on their way.

With Jaheira in the lead, they retraced their steps up the road to the north, where she had spotted a decent sized camping area near the road, which they had gone past earlier that day when it was raining. There, Jaheira, Khalid and Harry began to move around the place, creating a campsite for them, while Garrick watched the wounded after Harry had pulled them out of his weapons space.

Neither of them looked any worse for wear thankfully, still unconscious, still shivering in Imoen’s case. Jaheira and Harry once more fed them some, broth and a very light soup, before packing them back into the bed rolls Harry having donated his to Minsc for the night and laying them out by the fire Khalid and Garrick had lit a second ago.

“Go to sleep,” he ordered Jaheira. “Your spells are easily the most important thing to getting these two back on their feet. Garrick, you’re on first watch, wake me in two hours. You and I are going to switch off throughout the night.”

“Am I going to get that explanation about you and Imoen suddenly able to use spells at some point?” Garrick asked sarcastically. “We’re supposed to be traveling companions, you can keep secrets from traveling companions.”

“You don’t keep secrets from friends,” Harry replied coolly, in no mood to be diplomatic. “You can certainly keep them from traveling companions especially were only known for a few days.”

The man winced at that but went on doggedly. “I’d still like that explanation.”

Harry shrugged, looking over at Jaheira who hesitated, then nodded, and then Khalid, who just nodded. “I’ll give it to you I suppose, in the morning. Can you wait that long?”

Garrick rolled his eyes and the conversation slowly came to a close and soon everyone was either sitting down and trying to stay away, or very deliberately going to sleep.

When his eyes snapped open the next day, the first thing Harry did was sigh in relief.

You have rested for four hours

Due to not resting on a bed and not for a full night, your normal Paladin health regeneration has been reduced to a quarter.

Even so, that had given him twenty more health points than he had had yesterday, and he felt better for it. He slowly pushed his way up from where he had been sleeping, moving around and beginning to prepare breakfast.

Leaving her own tent to the smell of food, Jaheira frowned looking around at the rest of the party. She had rested for a full eight hours in order to regain all her spells, and by nature’s provenance they had not been been attacked during the night. So she had her spells and her mana was back up as much is it could be. She scowled irritably internally.  *There was a time where that number of gnolls would’ve been but a minor challenge to Khalid and me. Blast that curse!*

Regardless, she looked to Harry. “Which of them should I start with?”

“Imoen,” Harry said quickly. I’ll watch her health bar. Get her up into the yellow I think, and then switch to Minsc, then Garrick, Khalid, and finally me.”

“Why not start with him?”

“Is in danger of dying?”

“No,” Jaheira replied with a shake of her head. “I dressed his wounds, so he won’t bleed out, but he won’t wake up either without healing spells.”

“Then we stay here another day,” Harry said simply. “I want the rest of us able to fight, just in case another band of gnolls comes after him. They seem to be really determined to kill him didn’t they?”

The others all chuckled agreement, then Garrick said firmly while she’s doing that, I’d rather like that explanation please.

Imoen was sitting up, within a few minutes, and Khalid, Garrick, and Harry’s wounds had been healed for the most part. They still weren’t at 100% but going into a fight now didn’t seem as suicidal as it would have been before Jaheira saw to them. Garrick even started to slowly strum his balalaika, conjuring up the bardic regeneration aura around him, which filled the others with vitality and added strength.

He had taken Harry’s explanation about their Blood Mage skills with aplomb, but Harry had not shared with him his Advanced Adventurer skill, only his item box skill and the Blood mage skill which Imoen had taught him somehow. That seemed to the lesser very much the lesser of two evils.

They stayed there the rest of the day, simply resting, talking quietly and sleeping, all save Harry, whose Gamer ability did not allow him to nap. He made up for it though when Khalid and Imoen stood watch, Jaheira needing another full night’s sleep.

The next day, after using all of her Cure Minor Wounds spells on the others, Jaheira used her two Cure Serious wounds on the big guy, and Harry watched as the bandages were peeled off Minsc, to show fully healed skin, leaving behind tiny scars in some cases, like the one massive hit he’d taken late in the fight, which had forced Jaheira to use her last Cure Serious Wound spell on it.

That seemed to be enough, and slowly Minsc’s eyes began to open. He grumbled, one hand moving to his face as he said something about “That is the last time Minsc we’ll ever drink so much mead before bedtime. Milk only, for strong bones the better for hunting for evil to kick.” Then he blinked, staring up at them, before looking around frantically, his large hands slapping his still bare chest and sides. “Boo! Boo where are you?”

There was a squeak, and from out underneath the big guy, a tiny hamster appeared, rapidly climbing up his side, to rest on his chest. Imoen instantly cooed, “Oh it’s so cute!”

Harry however had him very much more important observation. “Where was that hamster hiding?”

“Did you not see him before?” Minsc asked. “He was taking part in the fight just as Minsc was. Truly, for all his tiny size, Boo is a might warrior.”

Harry blinked, trying to go over the fight, but then he frowned. “There was that one gnoll that I thought had a drop on you,” he said slowly, staring at the small creature.

Giant Space Hamster?

The Ranger Minsc believes that this is a fine example of the species known as Miniature Giant Space Hamster, although whether or not that is the case, you cannot tell. Regardless, this furry companion never leaves Minsc’s side, and at times might be seen as the more intelligent of the pair.

Special ability: Plus 100% to Minsc’s morale, grants immunity to mental attacks.

Harry raised his eyebrow at that, as Minsc replied “Of course! He goes for the eyes! No enemy protects his eyes well enough against the mighty jaws and claws of a miniature Giant Space Hamster warrior!”

While Khalid and Garrick just blinked, Imoen laughed. “All those muscles, and he’s a little wonky too. Excellent!”

“If by wonky you mean insane, then perhaps” Jaheira replied dryly. She moved over to examine Minsc’s head from behind, sighing as she found a few old scars indicative of head trauma. “Ah, that explains much.”

“Can I touch it?” Imoen asked looking at the little critter and ignoring Miss Grumpy Pants.

“You may pet him and feed him, but do not attempt to lift him away from Minsc. Only I can lift the mighty Miniature Giant Space Hamster that is Boo.”

“Mental trauma is not so easily healed alas,” Jaheira said with a sigh.

Harry shrugged and whispered so only the two half-elves could pick up on it. “Beyond the hamster, he seems to track pretty well. We’ll let him have his little foibles for now.”

“I have to thank you friends,” the man looked said looking around at them all. “Without your help, even mighty Berserker Ranger Minsc would have been overcome.”

Harry nodded thinking internally that Minsc seemed to like his lengthy names. “We’re adventurers, were supposed to help one another. Although I will say that fight was a little too close for comfort.” He then introduced himself and his friends.

Minsc boomed laughter. “And yet those are the best ones! Where you win much glory and renown, with tales to tell in the drinking halls back home in Rasheman.

“I don’t have a drinking hall,” Harry replied dryly. “And I don’t think I want to start drinking.”

Minsc gasped. “A warrior that does not trick! That just means that you have not tried Rasheman mead!”

“If w, w, we could get b, b, back on topic,” Khalid said ignoring the faint smile that had appeared on his wife’s face at Harry’s professing to not enjoy drinking. “C, c, can I ask, why exactly were y, you, running around nearly n, na, naked?”

“Not, that that’s entirely a bad thing,” Imoen said, ogling the man as he sat up against a log.

Minsc frowned, looking at her. “Minsc feels somewhat violated yet does not understand why. Nor do I understand why Boo is telling me good for you.”

Harry laughed but gestured Minsc to speak up. “Tell us your story Minsc.”

The story of why one so large and strong as Minsc is in such dire straits? It is a terrible tale.” He sighed, then took a bowl of hearty meat-based soup from Harry, sipping at it before going on. “Minsc was on his Dejemma, to become a full-blooded warrior. One must go on a walkabout around the world, accompanied by a witch, whose own Dejemma is to find some problem in the world and to solve it. We had come to this area, fearing the rise of some evil power.”

He then slammed his hands to the ground before covering his face, seemingly overcome by guilt and remembered pain. “But the gnolls, they came upon Minsc when he was resting his eyes for but a moment! And then… oh woe is Minsc! For they stole her away. They stole his witch, the Lady Dynaheir.”

“And all of your clothing and weapons?” Harry said.

Minsc nodded., His large hands clenching and unclenching. “Where they were taking us I know not, but while they simply knocked my witch, the Lady Dynaheir unconscious and kept her so, they made sport of Minsc.”

“But ha, the last joke was on them!” he said with a booming laugh, slamming his fists together, creating a sound almost like crushing skulls. “For they did not count on the Berserker strength that Minsc could call upon at need. When Minsc saw his chance, he called his Berserker fury, killed his guards, and escaped. Alas, beyond the simplest of commands, to himself Minsc is unable to think while in such a state, and so could only run.

“Well, let’s solve that issue right now,” Harry said, pulling out a spare pair of leggings and then a shirt.

Taking the clothing from Harry, Minsc stood up and moved off into the woods. “Minsc thanks you for while he is strong enough to deal with the elements, young Boo sometimes has trouble with the cold and would rather like to have more places to burrow.”

From next to him Harry heard “yummy muscles” from Imoen, as she stared after him, causing him to shudder. Not that Harry couldn’t see her point. The guy was all muscle, making Harry wonder if he should put some more stat points into strength, and he was taller than harry too.

After the big guy was dressed and sitting down again, Harry asked, “Do you know where this Dynaheir might have been taken?”

Minsc blinked looking up at him his eyes wide in hope. “Does that mean you will help Minsc even more? Does that mean you will help him find his witch?!”

“Yes,” Harry said with a nod. “Of course we’ll help. Saving a damsel in distress is after all, something all Adventurers should do.” *And if the gnolls are strong enough to operate so close to civilization in such numbers, it’s best we nip them in the bud now.*

Jaheira groaned, and Harry saw several messages one after another. He had gained trust with her, but lost respect again, which Harry supposed he could put that down to the fact that he was so quick to offer his help and was willing to set aside their main goal of solving the iron intake issue for this one.

Imoen though gained points, as did Garrick. Minsc instantly slipped from it’s previous, stance, which Harry hadn’t had time to read but had been combat ally, into full friend, while another message popped up about Khalid also sliding into friend.

Through your decision to help him rescue his kidnapped witch charge, you have Gained 500 respect and 500 trust with Minsc. You have 500/500 Respect, 500/500 Trust with Minsc.

Minsc is now your friend, for better or worse.

With your decision to save a damsel, you have earned +200 Respect, +200 Trust with Garrick. You have 510/500 Trust, 490/500 Respect with Garrick.

While you have enough trust with Garrick, Garrick doesn’t quite respect you enough to make the leap from Travelling Companion/Acquaintance to Friend.

To save a person in need from durance vile has cut Khalid to the core. You have gained 500 trust, 500 Respect with Khalid. You have 1180/1000 Trust and 1050/1000 Respect with Khalid.

Khalid is now your friend. You have to wonder how Jaheira will react to this…

Another message instantly popped up afterwards and Khalid jerked in surprise, staring at something none of the others could see.

Khalid has become your friend and is eligible for full party integration. Would you like to add Khalid to your party?

Minsc has become your friend and is eligible for full party integration. Would you like to add Minsc to your party?

Harry’s eyes widened as did Imoen’s, breaking her out of her momentary stupor, but Harry was unable to concentrate the on that. Because he found himself lifted up into the air by the larger man and nearly squeezed in half, Minsc apparently not having noticed or cared about the message appearing in front of his eye. “Yes! Harry, Minsc and boo! We will be butts kicking to retrieve our witch!”

“Gah, not if you break my ribs we won’t damn it I just got those healed!”

**End Chapter**

This has been edited by Udodelig Urningin.

**Chapter 5: Evil Smurfs, New Acquaintances and Morons**

Jaheira scowled at Minsc, who, in the true nature of any male in the face of a furious older female, gave the half-elven woman his best innocent smile. It didn’t work and her scowl didn’t go away as she pulled her hands away from Harry’s abdomen the blue light of a healing spell slowly disappearing from her hands. “I just healed Harry’s ribs and you go and break them in your exuberance Minsc? Tell me, are all Rashemani so careless with their strength, or is it another sign of the head wound you have so obviously sustained recently?”

She broke off as she looked at her husband, narrowing her eyes at him seeing his eyes were not on any of them, rather they seemed to be concentrating on something only he could see. But before she could speak, Minsc did so. “Minsc apologizes for wounding Harry, he should have realized that Harry would still be recovering from the mighty battle that we fought yesterday.”

He stopped as Boo squeaked in his ear, nodding to the hamster before he went on. “On another matter, Minsc is seeing something. He often sees many things, especially when he has partaken of his people’s best mead, or the shaman’s special tabac roots. But Boo is saying that he is seeing it as well, and as a young giant miniature space hamster, Minsc has never allowed Boo to partake of such. No matter how much Boo has pouted at him.”

As the others snickered or just stared at that, Minsc went on unperturbed. “There is an odd message box in front of Minsc, the type that he has seen when leveling up or taking on a quest in the past. But this time it is saying that Harry is offering to bring Minsc into his party, but Minsc already thought that he and Harry were a party. Did we not already agree to find Minsc’s Witch? Boo is saying this is the case, and yet there is no message for Boo either.”

“…I th, th, thought that your advanced ad, ad, adventurer skil, sk, skill couldn’t affect us,” Khalid began, frowning and rubbing at his forehead as he as he to stare at the message in front of him. “But be, be, because I apparently now see y, y, you as a friend, I a, am, seeing a me, mess, message must like Minsc’s. I can, ca, cannot complain about see, see, seeing you as a friend, y, y, you have been a tr, tru, true companion sin, si, since we met, a, an, and you decision to help Minsc find t, t, this stolen Witch of his s, s, speaks well of you be, beyon, beyond that. Yet, y, y, your AA Skill is g, g, going to affect me as w, w, well now because of t, th, that?”

“We said so back in the Friendly Arm Inn, didn’t we?” Imoen said pointing at herself. “That because he was able to add me into his party because of our relationship his AA skills sort of reached out into me.”

“Well yes, y, y, you said that, but s, s, seeing is one thing, be, b, believing another,” Khalid replied.

“I take it you now believe,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“Let us say,” the half elf male began with a laugh “th, th, that seeing th, th, this in front of m, m, my face is a most poi, poi, pointed re, re, reason. But why am I see, s, seeing this now?” Khalid asked, frowning.

“Well, that has to do with relationship statuses. Imoen was labeled as family by my AA Skill before she and I became party members. But when we met the two of you, we became aware of how relationships statuses impacted becoming real party members,” Harry said slowly.

“Explain,” Jaheira said, her voice brooking no argument.

Looking over at Imoen, Harry received a nod in reply and then turned back to Jaheira and Khalid. He briefly explained how he had been seeing various notices about how the two of them felt towards this or that activity or action he had committed during their time together. This lead up to Khalid becoming an actual friend, rather than Semi-Friendly, or a Traveling Companion.

To one side, Garrick listened to this looking more and more confused and annoyed as Harry spoke. For his part Minsc simply leaned back and listened intently, although whether or not that was to Harry and his explanation or the squeaking of Boo in his ear was anyone’s guess.

“And let me guess, I am at the point where I am a Traveling Companion correct?” Jaheira asked.

She was not well pleased to hear that Harry and Imoen had been keeping something this large from them, but she could well understand why they had done so. *It all sounds so fantastical! Being able to see how people around you react to your actions opinions? To your comments and everything else? That goes well beyond any ability or skill I’ve ever heard.*

Her eyes suddenly narrowed, and she was about to ask a very sharp question about whether or not Harry had been manipulated when she came to her senses. Harry was not a manipulator. Harry was about as straight as an arrow and while he obviously had some wisdom to keep secrets, he was not manipulative at all. *Confrontational, sometimes acerbic, and very opinionated he might be, but Harry is no intriguer to try and control us in such a manner.*

She was still very leery, more about the impact his power could have than about Harry’s personality, but she could understand why he kept that from them. “Tell me, with this revelation what points did you lose with me?” she asked suddenly, interested to see both what Harry would say, and how such a revelation had impacted their ‘relationship status’.

“As you’re still at the Traveling Companion level, the points I can earn with you are broken into two categories, Respect and Trust. “Whereas with them,” he went on, pointing to Minsc and Imoen. “The points are just friendship points. There aren’t obvious levels of friendship, it’s based on a scale system shown by a yellow to green, based on how how close a family member or Friend is. Imoen and I are right in the middle of family, and Minsc and Khalid are both on the low side for friendship.”

“Understandable. But the points I mentioned?”

Harry winced. “Um… before I read that out, I want you to be aware I don’t choose how these notices read off or anything, I don’t have any control over that. Whatever fragment of the murder-hobo that is in me is a snarky bit of soul I have to say.”

Jaheira nodded and gestured him to continue and he read them aloud still looking at Jaheira.

For being so tactless as to dare to keep parts of your AA skill a secret from her, you have lost -200 to trust, but gained +40 to respect with the Harper Jaheira. Evidently being secretive is actually a good thing up to a point with her, yet the lack of trust you’ve shown has for some reason actually hurt that stone heart of hers. She’ll probably get over it though… eventually.

When he finished reading that message off, the half-elven woman merely nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, that largely dovetails with my thoughts and feelings towards this revelation, though putting into a point format is odd to say the least. So, this Advanced Adventurer Skill is at least accurate in what it reads from us.”

Again Jaheira had the urge to ask if Harry had ever tried to manipulate them using this system but again, she fought the urge back. If he had wanted to manipulate her, he would have told her something different just then, or figured out some way of playing them off with some kind of story to explain how Khalid was able to now become part of Harry’s party rather than the truth like this.

“And if ever I needed the proof that you do not control much of this advanced adventuring system of yours Harry, the snarky attitude of that statement put paid to it. You have not shown any sign of that kind of humor before this. Still, it is a magnificent tool, one whose implications are even larger than I had first thought.”

“I haven’t followed anything about whatever you’ve been talking about for the last fifteen minutes,” Garrick said looking a little annoyed now, that the food was gone. “Can someone please explain this all to me?”

“Minsc is also very confused moment, but then Boo is also telling him that this is all something wondrous. Still, Minsc would like an explanation of the strange words hovering in front of his eyes. If they are going to continue to stay there, that will soon become annoying when we are faced with battle,” the large bald man said.

Harry looked at the two lovers closely. “Um, before we get to that, one thing that the AA skill will do which we haven’t talked about, because it hasn’t come up before, is that it will give me more information about you than just your stats. Your abilities, your skill sets, will all be visible to me.”

“For instance if you look at my status screen,” Harry said, before stating aloud most of his Life Skills, an openness that caused again Minsc and Garrick to look at him in shock. People did not just share their stats and skills like that, not even with their closest friends!

Then Minsc simply laughed, slapping his large hands together and shouted, “Excellent, most excellent, to show such trust in a fellow warrior, such an honest and true act. Minsc has truly found the right individual to journey with to rescue his Witch! I am perfectly fine becoming a party member with you, Harry Potter!”

“You n, n, never said anything about b, being able to see that k, kind of thing before”, Khalid asked incredulously, and accusingly.

“No I didn’t,” Harry said with a shrug. “I realized that what I could already tell you and do with the AA system was too much as it was. Or can you look me in the eye and say that you would have believed such as that on top of everything else.”

“We would not have,” Jaheira replied instantly for Khalid again. “And you know it husband. Trust does not only go one way. That is why it is so hard to build.” At that Khalid could only nod, knowing his wife had a point.

“What the heck is going on!?” Garrick asked plaintively, staring after them before turning to look at Harry and Imoen. “First you and Imoen can use spells, now you Khalid and Minsc are sharing what could only be hallucinations yet all of you are treating it like it’s real?”

Khalid looked at his wife, and a silent communication went between them for a moment, a thing of raised eyebrows and frowns Harry could not follow. Then Khalid stood up and the two half-elves excused themselves quickly heading out into the woods. “We will be back, but we need to talk about this and it’s implications.”

Behind them, Harry looked at Imoen, twitching his head to Minsc and Garrick, but she smirked back at him, patting Minsc on the arm as she winked at Harry. It looked as if the cat was out of the bag good or bad, and she didn’t care much one way or another. That made Harry rather annoyed with himself and how his AA skill acted sometimes. *And here I am getting better at not reacting to the messages as they pop up like that, and then this happens.* “Well, this is going to take some explaining Garrick. And I will ask both you and Garrick to give me your words you won’t share anything I am going to tell you with anyone else without my permission.”

Scowling Garrick gave his promised while Minsc simply nodded, patting his stomach. This sounds like a long tale, but in that case, could we at least take the time to eat? Not only does food and wine make a tale-telling better, but a mighty warrior such as Minsc has an equally mighty appetite,” he finished with a Booming laugh. “And Boo is a growing giant space hamster so has a most mighty appetite as well.”

“And what exactly does Boo eat? And for that matter, do you have any dietary requirements as a Rashemani? Or as a Ranger, does that mean you can’t eat cooked meat or something?” Harry joked.

Minsc laughed, slapping Harry on the shoulder. For all of Harry’s own strength, that slap was tremendously powerful, and Harry had to shift his shoulder slightly to get the sting of it out. Nonetheless, he moved over to the fire, and began to lay out a few pans. “Imoen, I don’t suppose you could rustle us up some fish from the stream? Or would you rather start this explanation?”

“Sure, but I also want to loot the bodies. You lot didn’t get to them all did you?” Imoen

“No and I think Khalid and Garrick were more interested in any money or armor they could find,” Harry replied.

Out in the forest, Khalid and Jaheira stared at one another. “The moment we heard about this AA skill being able to reach out to Imoen we knew something like this was possible,” Jaheira began, then smirked. “If not in exactly the same fashion.”

“Agreed. B, b, but, I do not want to take this pl, pl, plunge without you, my dear,” Khalid replied.

“Bah,” Jaheira, waving a hand like she was swatting a fly. “While I might not completely trust Harry, he has proven to be a good sort,” she said, each word coming out as if winched out of her with great effort.

To say that Jaheira did not trust easily was putting it mildly, although Khalid knew why that was of course. They had both been betrayed several times as Harpers, not by other Harpers of course, but by contacts, local allies and so forth. On top of that Jaheira had been betrayed most cruelly several times before they had met. So he knew how hard it was for her to completely trust someone. Whereas Khalid came by his openness naturally, not so much because he was a friendly sort, although he was, but because he liked to see the best in people.

And so far, he had only seen the best from Harry. Heck, while he didn’t agree with it, Khalid could even understand why a young adventurer like him was trying to stand up for himself more than was probably wise of him. And in this last fight, Harry had saved his life several times, as they fought to save another warrior and then at the end, had made a selfless decision to find and rescue a woman in need rather than to follow the voice of logic which should have dictated that they prioritize the Iron Intake Issue.

All of that had come together to make Khalid trust Harry more, both in his decision-making skills and in terms of his basic humanity. Even as a paladin that last wasn’t something that could be assumed in this imperfect world of theirs.

“And what is holding you back my husband?” Jaheira asked, one eyebrow rising in query. “The fear that I will be left behind?”

“The fear th, th, that you will begin t, t, to feel ostracized,” Khalid said.

Jaheira rolled her eyes. “As if that is not a feeling I have ever dealt with before. Besides which, you have seen how they act, do you think that Harry or Imoen would really be willing to push me out of things? Just because I’m not a full party member doesn’t mean anything in terms of traveling with them. It just means that I don’t have access to this AA Skill, which is, frankly annoying. But Harry said it himself, it is based on trust and respect, and I have always been tougher in those areas that you.”

She frowned and took Khalid’s hand in hers, squeezing. “But what is really bothering you? It certainly is not the idea that you will be seeing and taking advantage of something that I will not for a while. No, this is more personal.”

Khalid looked away, frowning and crossing his arms. “The c, c, curse,” he muttered, his stutter even more evident than normal. “He’ll s, s, see the c, c, curse. If he’s a, a, able to see ev, ev, everything else, including our stats an, and all, he’ll see the n, n, negative as well as the p, p, positive. He’ll want an ex, ex, explanation.”

Jaheira winced but did not relinquish his grip on her hand. “We probably owe him that anyway. You’ve been wanting to give him one for certain no? After all, they both can tell our levels, and that neither of us are as tough or as skilled as we should be.”

Khalid winced at that but nodded slowly. “Y, yes, but I w, w, wanted to do it on o, o, our terms.”

Jaheira shrugged. “We rarely get what we want in this life. I say we see what happens, see what he can see when you become a full party member. And then, we can tell them whatever we wish afterwards.”

The two of them looked at one another, and Khalid shrugged. “I sup, sup, suppose then we sh, sh, shall see what we shall s, s, see. Or rather H, H, Harry will.”

Back in the camp, they found Harry had finished explaining things to Minsc and Garrick and had also prepared a hearty lunch for them all. The smell of it hit the two half-elves and Jaheira and Khalid both smiled. “Braised fish?” she asked as she moved over to look at them in the pan. “With wild onion and garlic no less.”

Harry simply shrugged. “Well, I thought that good food would make this conversation go more smoothly. Minsc came up with the onion and garlic, and Imoen caught the fish for us.”

Imoen’s ability with unusual weapons like whips actually had carried over with her ability to fly fish for some reason. She had also found several dozen bottles of nasty grog on the gnolls which her thief skills had told her could be used to create a new kind of fire or grease trap. Traps had been something she’d trained on in the tutorial, but hadn’t yet used out in the wider world.

“And watching him cook gave us something other than this fantastical story he’s been telling us to concentrate on. This, this AA skill…” Garrick said chuckle shaking his head. “I’m almost upset at how much of an advantage it gives you. I mean the ability to see your own stats, to control where your stat points go, where your skill points go? That is just huge!”

“Indeed!” Minsc said, thrusting a large fist into the air. The other hand was currently holding Boo, one thumb gently rubbing the top of his little head. “And yet, nothing we have learned has made Minsc change his mind. Harry most definitely is the best person we could choose to help us rescue Dynaheir!”

Harry held up a hand. “Minsc, this is a big decision and a bigger commitment between us. You joining my party means our affiliation is going to go on a lot longer than it will take us to find our Witch. This is a long-term commitment.”

Minsc nodded his head. “I fully understand, and it speaks well of you that you would wish me to make a decision like this knowing that. But Minsc is unconcerned. Minsc is a Ranger of Rasheman, and I can sense that there will be much evil butts to be kicked in the future with you! The only way that you would get rid of me is if my Witch, Dynaheir decides that we cannot travel with you for some reason that is beyond the ken of men and hamsters. And that will not happen until we rescue her.”

“Then I promise that we will rescue her whatever we have to do,” Harry said with a nod. “Or avenge her if it comes to that. I promise.”

At those words Minsc eyes blazed, and he reached across and held Harry’s forearm in a warrior’s clasp firmly. “Minsc will take that as an oath given between warriors. Let evil tremble at this!”

Your bellicose and hasty oath has earned you 200 relationship points with Minsc. Warning: as his basic friendship with you indicated, this is based on your helping him find Dynaheir. If you cannot do that, prepare to see a blowback of most heinous proportions. Even if you are able to avenge her.

Smiling at the two men, Khalid turned the conversation back to the elephant in the room, asking, “What ex, ex, exactly does this ent, en, entail? A, a, as party leader, how m, mu, much control of my actions wi, wi, will this give you?”

Harry looked to Imoen to answer that one, and she replied promptly, “Very little. Oh,” she waved her hand airily. “I follow Harry’s instructions in battle most the time as you’ve noticed, but I can go my own way just as easily. I would say, that the greatest thing it does is the ability to share skills. The most disturbing it does, is that it gives Harry control of your stats.”

Both Garrick and Minsc must have just heard the same thing because their expressions did not change. Like every other adventurer, they knew that stats were given out the instant you leveled up, assigned via the activity that had leveled you up. It was why a Bard or warrior would have specialized stats that would help them in their various abilities, rather than a more balanced approach: a high level of charisma or wisdom for Garrick as a bard, and an equally high level of strength and endurance for Minsc. To hear that Harry would be able to control those for them, well that was big.

The talk continued for a few minutes with Imoen dominating it now, putting to rest any lingering fears Khalid had about the amount of control AA Skill afforded Harry of his actions and abilities. She emphasized the lack of that, and the among of help being in the same party as Harry offered her in terms of combat. But what really sold both half-elves was the fact that Khalid would have access to his own Item Box as the two Bhaalspawn did.

“In that case,” Jaheira said briskly, “I suggest you add Minsc into your party. Then read us out what you have learned about him in so doing. We will then make a final decision on whether or not we wish to fully join your party Harry.”

Harry nodded, and Minsc pushed the yes button – which he had seen previously when he, as an Adventurer accepted quests - to accept Harry’s offer to join his party as Harry did the same on his end. Almost instantly, both of them were inundated by messages and Imoen gasped as she too saw more than a few messages. The first Harry saw was the shortest and least helpful.

“Congratulations, you have added a third person to your party! You are one step closer to being able to fully utilize the Tactics skill!”

It didn’t tell Harry anymore about the Tactics skill, or how many more people he needed to actually start using the Tactics skill. After that though, things got more interesting.

Congratulations, Harry has learned Cleave.

Cleave is a specialized Warrior skill that allows you to add three times the damage to any edged weapon attack. Warning: active skills come with cool down times. You can only use Cleave once every three minutes.

Imoen has learned Cleave! Warning: Imoen does not have enough Strength to use Cleave. The skill is now locked.

Imoen’s ‘Hide In Shadows’ skill has gone up 23% thanks to Minsc’s Ranger skills.

The next notice that Harry and Imoen both saw was:

“Congratulations, you have started to learn the Ranger skill: Woodcraft.”

Woodcraft, a skill of rangers and Druids, which allows you to discern what animals are in the area, follow tracks, and find food in the wood lands other than the four-legged variety. This includes but is not limited to numerous verbs, which can be used for potions, or cooking.

Notice: your skill in cooking is high enough to use anything you find in the wood lands, just make sure to clean at first.

Minsc too saw a new message. He in turn had learned Backstab, as Harry had from Imoen. And his own Hide in Shadows, which had been 23% chance had gone up by 32%, half of Imoen’s preexisting chance rate.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said after reading the messages aloud, looking over at Minsc. “I saw you use that attack, Cleave, during the fight. But you’re a Ranger, not a Warrior. How do you have a Warrior skill, and how can it be a high level one like that?”

“Indeed,” Minsc said with a bellowing laugh, as he in looked at what backstab would do for him. The idea of dealing that much damage to the butts of evil was most amazing to think of. The fact that according to Boo, Boo had also learned the same skill was equally interesting. *His ability to go for the eyes is even greater now!* “But while the warriors of other nations might learn Cleave as an advanced skill, my people, whatever their adventuring title, can learn it from the instant they start training! That is what sets a Rashemani barbarian apart from a common Adventurer.”

He frowned then, pouting a little. “But, there are rights and practices that you must observe before you can first use Cleave as a true barbarian of Rasheman! Hmm… we will have to put that off until after we rescue Dynaheir! But I do look forward to training you in the ways of the barbarian Ranger! Why, one day you may even be able to attract your own familiar! It could even be another miniature giant space hamster, although perhaps that is aiming too high.”

Jaheira looked somewhat dyspeptic at that thought, while Harry’s smile went a little wooden. At the same time in another dimension, Hedwig’s eyes snapped open on her perch in Hermione’s room, and she let loose a low, very dangerous sounding “preck...”

“And because it’s a learned skill, not a hereditary one, it carries over,” Imoen exclaimed, hugging Minsc around the shoulders. “Damn that’s awesome! Think about what you can do with backstab and with Cleave, that’s a certain kill shot right there on anything human -sized! And maybe even anything bigger if you add in the Flank Attack attribute.”

Minsc smiled and nodded at that, while Garrick was scowling, willing himself to trust Harry more, muttering under his breath. “Come on, come on! He helped you so much with Silk, and now we’re going to rescue another potentially fair maiden? A real one this time. If that doesn’t show he’s got a good heart what does? Come on just a hundred more points! Come on, you want the relationship level to get better, right!?!”

It was actually ten respect and ninety trust, but given his current frustrations, it was understandable, perhaps, that Garrick didn’t make that distinction.

Jaheira looked at him askance and Harry swiftly moved away from him on the log they were sharing. The two of them looked at one another and exchanged a smile, before turning back to the others. “Well, I think we’re ready to go on to look at Minsc’s stats correct?”

Everyone nodded, even Minsc leaning forward eagerly. Of course he knew his own stats. Any adventurer could see their own status screen to that extent. But he was interested to see what his new friends thought of them.

**Name**: Minsc

**Gender**: Male

**Race**: Human

**Class**: Level 6 Ranger

Strength: (28/93)

Willpower: (6) +15

Dexterity: (15)

Constitution: (12)

Durability: (13)

Wisdom: (4)

Charisma: (5)

Intelligence: (6)

Luck: (5)

Harry whistled, staring at Minsc’s Strength. “Remind me to never get into an arms wrestling contest with you big guy.”

Minsc boomed out a laugh again, and Harry realized, somewhat belatedly, that doing so was his normal way of laughing. “Indeed, few even in the warrior log houses of my homeland would dare to try and match my strength in such a contest.”

“Just the way I like ‘em,” Imoen murmured, pushing a little closer towards Minsc. “Brawny and dumb.”

“Minsc feels he’s been insulted and yet complemented at the same time. He is also feeling a little uncomfortable, despite the fact that Boo is telling him to just go with the flow. But we are not in a river, so I do not understand what he means,” Minsc murmured, his face showing his confusion as Imoen moved to lean against him.

Khalid reached out and gently but firmly took Imoen’s shoulder and pulled her away from the confused Ranger. “E, e, enough of that for now m, m, my dear. Continue Ha, ha, Harry,” He said, his voice somewhat tense as he knew that now the stats had been read out, they would go on to the next segment of Minsc’s status screen.

**Life Skills**:

Beast Familiar: With Boo as his ranger companion, Minsc is immune to mind-control type attacks. They may gain a foothold, but will not remain in place long.

**Class Specific Skills**:

Woodcraft level 5: Minsc is else at home in any Woodland or jungle as an animal who has lived there all his life. He is able to track, hunt, and ‘Hide In Shadows’ in any natural environment despite his tremendous size.

“You see, Boo? Even Harry’s amazing Advanced Adventuring Skill knows that you are mighty despite your miniature status. I will have no more talk about your being too small. The lady giant miniature space hamsters will know you for your greatness regardless of your size.”

As he heard that, there was a moment of utter disconnect in Harry’s mind for a moment, and then Imoen was laughing, causing a chain reaction among the others. Even Minsc joined in, although he stated that he didn’t know why everyone was laughing. “Still, laughter is good for the soul!”

Harry nodded at that. He liked Minsc and was looking forward to traveling with him*. It will certainly never be dull. It’s like getting a larger, more random version of Imoen in my life! One with a less ribald sense of humor and more jokes that I can actually follow without having to think about them.*

Pushing herself up right, Jaheira coughed, looking as if she wanted to make it seem as if the last few minutes of total laughter had not in fact occurred. Without much success it must be said, but she was the first to fully regain control of herself, and she coughed into her one hand, then smoothed out her hair, playing with the beads in her hair for a moment. “\*Ahem\*, yes, well, I believe that you were speaking Harry? Is there anything more you can tell us?”

“Well he’s got a bloodline skill here, Berserker. ‘At a mental command or in reaction to certain events, Minsc becomes enraged for two hours,’” Harry read off. “’While enraged gains a massive bonus to his strength and becomes completely immune to charm, confusion, fear, feeble mind, hold, level drain, maize, stun and sleep. He also gains fifteen heath points temporarily, which disappear at the end of the Berserk rage. This can possibly knock Minsc unconscious if he is wounded enough, though he cannot die from this backlash.’”

Hearing this Minsc blinked in wide-eyed surprise. “Minsc knew that he was stronger and faster in his berserk state, but to be so immune to so many spells! Truly, the spirit of the Rashemani Ice Dragon berserker lodge is a powerful gift!”

Imoen asked, “Okay so what is his favorite weapons?”

“As if you need to ask Harry that! Any weapon that is in my hands becomes my favorite weapon, for it helps me to buttkick the forces of evil!” Minsc began, before going on more hesitantly, if such a word could ever be used to describe him. “But I do prefer the large Claymore, the bow and arrow, and halberds.”

“That’s right,” Harry said with a nod. “He’s got two skill slots in Two Handed sword, two in Longbow, one in halberd and one in mace.”

“And other than the halberds that we took from the enemy, we don’t have any of those weapons in our inventory do we?” Jaheira asked frowning. “Going directly after this Dynaheir woman is looking to be less and less of a good idea. I mean no offense Minsc,” she said holding her hand up as the large man seemed to swell at that. “But we need to talk about this further after we are done exploring what Harry’s AA Skill can do for his party members.”

For a moment everyone fell silent, thinking about what they learned then Khalid asked a question. “We A, A, Adventurers, wh, when we accepts quests we g, g, get quest notifications. D, d, does your AA Skills tell you an, an, anything more than the re, re, regular version?”

“You tell me,” Harry said with a shrug. “I’ll read it out for you, as well as the journal entry.”

You have accepted the Side Quest (medium), Where’s the Witch?

While Jaheira, Imoen and Khalid all groaned at that, Minsc nodded his head sagely, “Mmm, that is a good name, most descriptive of our current plight.” He then looked confused as Harry slapped his face with one hand. “Was there a mosquito friend Harry? I hate that.”

“Um, yeah, let’s go with that,” Harry said while attempting to glare a smirking Imoen into silence, but having little luck as the others were also fighting back laughs at his expense. After a few seconds of fulminating impotent glaring, Harry went on.

The warrior Minsc has come before you with a plea to help him rescue his Witch, Dynaheir who he was traveling with on the equivalent of their dual rites of passage. Minsc cannot become a true warrior of his warrior lodge without returning home with Dynaheir.

Dynaheir moreover is searching out some great evil that Witches of her school are apparently sent out to find as part of their own rite of passage, although what that evil meant to be, you do not know.

Harry looked at Minsc quizzically at that, and he shrugged his shoulders. “the wily Dynaheir has not said much of that, only that she felt compelled to come here to the Sword Coast, to investigate Nashkel in particular. She told me she had glimpses of great evils, both large and small.”

“Personal evils like murder or such I suppose,” Imoen said before going on with an overdone eyeroll. “And large like, oh I don’t know, the Iron Intake Issue! It seems everything is coming back to it.”

“Not just the Iron Intake Issue,” Harry said shaking his head. “But the people who have put that scheme into motion.”

Jaheira and Khalid nodded at that in approval. After all, foiling one scheme which no doubt had lined the pockets of the individuals behind was one thing. It was entirely another to bring those people to justice.”

“Truly! For when a plot is foiled villains will always find a way to skitter away and hide once more in their dens, like the mice they truly are when the mighty forces of justice come for them!” Minsc bellowed. Like booming a laugh, bellowing seemed to be Minsc’s normal means of communication.

Harry grinned at the other man, nodding his head. Despite his age and the experience of travelling however long they had been since they left the tutorial behind, there was still a bit of of the little boy in him who longed to be the kind of Paladin who went around righting wrongs and saving people. And it looked as if Minsc was onboard for following that ideal.

Khalid however was frowning. “An, an, and that is all?”

Harry nodded. “Yes. Oh, we can figure out other things along the way, there are a few clues here, little dots to indicate that we can learn things that will help us in this quest, like what Imoen did back in the Friendly Arm Inn, although this is the first time I’ve ever seen the initials places for those hints marked out like this. But that’s all my AA skill can tell me.”

He frowned thinking, then looked over at Minsc. “Minsc, you’re the only one who can tell us anymore. You say you were attacked by Gnolls. Could you tell which direction they were going with when you were there captive? And were there any other creatures with them?”

In response the bald-headed barbarian Ranger frowned, thinking deeply as Boo climbed up him to perch on his shoulder. “They were moving south, for a time. They were not following any roads of course. As much as I loathe the creatures, Gnolls are as at home in the forest as any Ranger could be, even one so well trained as I. There were many of them, but I cannot say how many there were, or where the numbers of gnolls who followed Minsc came from. As for other creatures of villainy with them, I cannot remember any.”

He broke off as Boo squeaked and squeaked some more before nodding. “But Boo says that he spotted other creatures, small ones coming and going, delivering food to the Gnolls and then retreating. They were tiny little creatures, so small that Minsc might have missed them, but with blue skin.”

“Xvarts,” Jaheira and Khalid both said as one.

“Bless you,” Imoen said, and Jaheira and rolled her eyes.

Khalid explained. “N, n, no, that wasn’t a sneeze, that’s their race is c, c, called, xvarts. They are small gob, go, goblin-like creatures, smarter than most though in t, t, that they are able to work to, to, together more ef, ef, effectively. They also with blue s, sk, skin and rounded ears rather than p, p, pointed.”

“And they are intelligent enough to get along with other sub-humans, like gnolls, orcs and so forth. It sounds as if the gnolls have been able to subjugate them, but I’m afraid that doesn’t help us find this Dynaheir woman,” Jaheira said with a sigh.

But it did update my quest Harry said with a nod, before going on to explain what he was seeing.

The (medium) side quest ‘Where’s the Witch’ has been updated. You have discovered new information.

“’You have learned from the barbarian Ranger Minsc that there were other creatures working with the gnolls even if they were not involved in actually taking Minsc or his companion captive. They in fact were supplying the gnolls with food and drink as they were traveling. That implies that there is a camp of them between where Minsc was attacked, and where the gnolls are making their hideout. Perhaps finding it will give you more of a clue as to the final destination of Dynaheir and her captors.’”

Minsc’s eyes widened. “Truly, your Advance Adventuring Skill is a gift from the great god Ao! That would never have occurred to Minsc!”

Harry nodded truthfully. “It is, but while that was very helpful, I don’t think we’ll be able to add more to it right now.” He looked at Khalid, then Jaheira before asking hesitantly, “So, did you to make a decision? I don’t want to pressure you or anything, but you were able to hear what I found out about Minsc.”

Khalid looked as if he was going to be back away again, but Jaheira reached over and took his hand, squeezing once. That seemed to give him more courage and he nodded. “I’m fully w, w, willing to call you a friend, an, an, and if that means I c, c, can be part of your adventuring p, p, party, and ta, ta, take advantage of what that m, me, means, it is worth it. I’d simply a, a, ask that you do not j, j, judge me or Jaheira by w, wh, what you find out.”

“You know I could just add you in and not look if it matters so much to you,” Harry said with a shrug. “I would promise not to and that would be that.” He smirked. “What kind of paladin would I be if I broke that kind of promise after all.”

“No,” Jaheira said and Khalid echoed her. “It wo, wo, would fester be, be, between us, the fact th, th, that you were willing to trust us, that y, y, you were willing to ex, ex, extend the hand of friendship, b, b, but we were not w, w, willing to meet you h, ha, halfway.”

“While it is not my place to say anything at this point as I cannot in good conscience yet call you friend, I believe that knowledge is power, being able to see that information will be important for both of you. And perhaps, a second eye on a certain issue may help myself and Khalid.” Jaheira said.

Harry looked at them both, locking eyes with one then the other, until they both nodded, then breathed in deeply, and slowly exhaled it, before raising a finger. “Okay. Let’s do this.” A second later, the congratulations message popped up.

“You now have more people in your adventuring party. You will be able to use Tactics!”

Your Tactics skill is now level 2, experience level 100/3000 to next level. Tactics levels up passively during combat and you will not receive notices about gaining experience until you level up.

You are able to command your fellows and put them in a position to do damage, creating Formations. Creating the correct Formation for any given battle will give you combat bonuses. These bonuses will not carry over to allied combatants, but they can be used to create the Formation in question.

You understand a bare minimum of how to use terrain to your advantage, and the idea of planning ahead for a specific combat is something you have now learned is a good idea, although strategic planning is still well beyond you. You will gain 50% chance in succeeding to give an order to a party member.

Make decisions, command your party in battle, and lead them to victory, and your tactical ability will level up, opening further features and buffs for you and your party!”

After that was a few more messages the like Harry and Imoen had seen before, about Khalid learning Cleave and Backstab. And unlike Imoen, Khalid had enough strength to use Cleave.

In return, Harry was able to learn Shield Bash, although he also received a notice that the side quest (small) which he would’ve have to complete to learn it had been failed. Since that didn’t come with a onus, Harry ignored it to gain shield bash, reading it off for Minsc’s benefit since he, unlike Imoen, had the strength to use it.

You have learned Shield Bash. This is a high level warrior skill which can be learned at later levels.

Using your shield you can bash your enemy off balance, backward or even entirely off his feet depending on the combat environment at the time.

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

Beyond that, there were a few level activated skill notices that Harry and the others lacked the requirements to use. They were just straight up determined by levels, but once Harry and his party members reached those levels they would be able to use them. Bar Imoen at least, unless she raised her durability and strength levels a lot more than they were now.

Harry read all that off, then looked at Khalid for permission to turn his attention to Khalid’s stats. He nodded, and Harry continued.

**Name**: Khalid

**Gender**: Male

**Race**: Half-Elf

**Classification**:  Level 32 Warrior (-26)

Strength: (62) - 48

Willpower: (18) -15

Dexterity: (104) - 80

Constitution: (88) -68

Durability: (22)

Wisdom: (32)

Charisma: (19) -15

Intelligence: (16)

Luck: (7)

Listening to this, Garrick looked pained. “On the one hand, that really does tell you how far we have to go, but on the other, minus forty-eight to strength? Minus eighty to dexterity, minus sixty-eight to Constitution!? What in the world did you run into Khalid?”

“Is not what he ran into child, but what **we** ran into,” Jaheira barked, coming to her husband’s aid instantly, almost growling like an animal at Garrick who flinched back.

Harry actually smiled at that, picturing Jaheira as a mama bear trying to defend her young was kind of funny. But the next part he knew was going to get serious right bloody quickly. “Your favorite weapon is longsword, you’ve got three skill slots and that, four in sword and shield, three in Longbow, one in crossbow. And now we get on to the bloodline and life skills,” Harry said slowly. He stared at each title, then began with the bright side.

Half Elven. Due to his half Elven heritage, Khalid is at home in the forest and able to see in the dark. His hearing is also acute, though not to the level of a full elf. He is also long-lived, being 376 years old.

This came as no surprise to any of them, after all elves and even half-elves were common in this world.

Hunter, level 5: Thanks to his wife being a Druid and due to his own childhood growing up in the forest, Khalid is more than capable of hunting for his food, and though not the best at finding a trail, will gain +4 to any critical hit and chance to hit with bows on any food animal.

That also made sense given Khalid routinely added venison or some pork to their dishes on the road. From there though the AA Skill went on into more unknowns.

Indomitable: Due to special training, the warrior Khalid has a +5 to all defensive abilities, which includes the Sword and Shield passive skill, the durability of his body and armor, and the activated Skill Shield Bash.

This skill is unavailable due to lack of strength and endurance.

Fortitude: a high level warrior skill, this active skill allows warriors to ‘tank’ as it were, taking damage for indeterminate amount of times.

This skill is currently disabled due to lack of strength and endurance.

There Harry paused, staring at what was revealed to him before looking over at the married couple. “Are you sure you want me to go on, because all that’s left are the two negatives. We can get by with only seeing the symptoms caused rather than the reason behind them.”

The two half-elves exchanged glances, and then Jaheira nodded firmly. Harry idly wondered if she could honestly nod, or do much of anything else, any other way at this point. “Go on. And I will explain afterwards. “After all, it was my fault that we became afflicted.”

“No it was n, n, not!” Khalid said snappily. “I agreed with you th, that, we needed to att, attack **his** island. It w, w, was what we were sup, sup, supposed to do as H, h, Harpers after all.”

“And yet, the Harpers have not been able to help us get rid of that curse, while at the same time still demanding that we continue our work. No, I am at fault for what occurred to us.”

Harry cut them off quickly. “Let’s not play the blame game okay. I’m gathering that this is something that happened far in the past right? That means, that it is in the past! You can’t solve it by by continually beating it to death.”

Both half-elves nodded, looking somewhat abashed, and Harry looked at Khalid again who nodded to allow him to continue.

**Status disorders:**

**(Note, disorders are permanent or near to permanent changes to an individuals’ stats and abilities. Unlike Status ailments, they cannot be cured easily or at all.)**

Spell damage: Sometime in the past, Khalid was near a spell gone wrong, which has permanently damaged his mind and thus his ability to speak. This impacts his willpower and makes him more susceptible to mental attacks, and Charisma, due to the stutter it has given him.

“Which we’d already known about,” Harry said with a nod. “This one though is where it gets interesting. Do you, that is we could ask Garrick and Minsc if they’d be willing to leave?”

Garrick nodded quickly, and actually stood up along with Minsc. “If you do not wish to share it with Minsc, Minsc understands. He thinks there is no shame in past wrongs, only in not addressing those which did the wrongs in the first place. But he can understand that the embarrassment of being a victim of such, none better given what happened to his Witch on his watch!”

Jaheira and Khalid again exchanged looks, then shook their heads. No, they can stay. This is our secret misery, but it really should not be. No matter how much we argue whose fault it is, we both know that it was the creature who did this to us who is truly to blame, and thus any shame is on him.”

“Well spoken,” Harry said with a nod, fully understanding that kind of thinking. After all, there had been a time where he blamed himself for what happened to his parents, when in reality, it was no one’s fault but Voldemort’s for attacking him. With that in mind he read off the next disorder.

Curse of the Dread One:

In his past, Khalid was subjected to a curse by a powerful magician. This curse halves his level and the top three of his stats. This curse is as strong as the creature who cast it and cannot be removed by any normal priest or priestess.

Having finished reading this off, Harry shook his head. “I didn’t even know a curse like that was even possible. I’ve heard of creatures being able to drain your level, but a curse to do the same thing… and so much too…”

The two of them exchanged another glance, Jaheira began to speak. “As all but Minsc and Garrick knows, myself and my husband are Harpers. We have been around the world several times, then practically every civilized country in the world and faced numerous enemies. But one we faced, in the straights of Amn, he was terrible in every definition. We were part of a group of Harpers sent to discover the head of a slaving ring. More importantly we were to learn what was going on with the slaves. They were not appearing in any of the normal places, so we knew this individual, who was only called the Dread One was using them for his or her own fell purposes instead of selling them on.”

“Grrr… slavery is the most dastardly of villainy! To take a man’s freedom so, to to chain him like a beast of burden! It makes Minsc want to bring the boot of righteousness to all involved!” Minsc growled. “Even Boo, slower to anger than Minsc as he is, becomes angry at the very idea.”

“Indeed. But at any rate, we discovered where the slaves were sent: a small out-of-the-way island near the southern border of Amn. The Harpers were able to clandestinely convince the local government to add in several companies of Amnian infantry to help us. The Dread One had been making an enemy of himself in several different ways apparently, above and beyond slavery which isn’t illegal in Amn. But when we actually attacked him in his place of power, it all went wrong.”

Jaheira shivered, and that seeing this strong, proud and confident woman looked frightened, drove home to Harry the seriousness of what had occurred. “The troopers were picked off by spells and traps before we even got within his base, an old fort on a large hill. We discovered quickly upon entering and freeing a number of slaves that he was sacrificing the blood of his slaves to somehow transform dryads, he had captured into… into something else. We also discovered that the Dread One was a vampire and was working with a coven of others. One of whom was nearly as powerful as he was. We had apparently just missed that one. If we had not, neither Khalid nor myself would be here now.”

“We had not come prepared for such a foe. But we had the numbers of the soldiers on her side, and one of our party was a Vampire Hunter of some good repute. He took over leading us, and we fought our way into the main hold. But the Dread One was prepared, and he used spells on us all cursing each and every one of us who passed the threshold of that room. And then he simply started killing, laughing all the while.”

“N, none of o, o, our weapons did a, a, anything,” Khalid said, gesturing to his sword. “I g, g, got in c, c, close, and I d, d, don’t think he even n, n, noticed my attack. I, I, it was like we were less th, th, than nothing to him. M, m, mere in, in, inconveniences! That w, w, we had f, f, forced him to b, b, break some k, k, kind of contract with s, s, some other individual, who he called The Exile,” Jaheira said with a nod.

“After he tore apart the first few soldiers and after his immunity to our weapons became apparent, we could do nothing but retreat. Of all of us who went to that dread isle, only four of us survived, Khalid, myself and two Amnian troopers, their minds broken by the experience,” Jaheira said after a long silence. “Yet our survival was not the end of it. We were still cursed, as we had been since the moment the battle began, and we have not been able to get rid of it. We have gone to every temple we were able to find: of light god’s, neutral gods and hose evil gods known to accept deals from non-followers and follow through with them like Shar. None were able to discover how to lift the curse. It’s vampiric in nature, that is all anyone was able to tell us.”

“…Well,” Harry said staring above their faces “Now I can tell you that it isn’t impossible. Because I just got a quest update.”

You have found the side quest (large) Free Your Companion of His Curse.

Your party member - and his wife - are suffering under the curse of the Dread One, an ancient vampire. Yet how could even a vampire mage thousands of years old create a curse the gods could got not get rid of? Surely something can be done if you can find the right god to ask for aid. Discover hints about the nature of the curse, and free them from it’s grasp.

+7000 experience when accomplished.

Jaheira smiled, and Khalid grinned wildly. Harry idly noticed that Jaheira had gained several more points in trust and respect toward him at that moment, pushing her even closer to becoming his true friend like Khalid.

With your promise to help them overcome the curse afflicting them, you have gained +500 friendship points with Khalid.

You have also gained +2000 to respect and Trust points with Jaheira. Perhaps this mountain isn’t so insurmountable after all, merely extremely difficult.

He was happy about that, but even happier for the words she said. “That gives us hope Harry. That actually gives us more hope than either of us have had in a very long time. Thank you! Now we know at least that there **is** some kind of cure there.”

“And I will help you search for it,” Harry said with a nod. “That’s the least I can do for a friend…and a Traveling Companion who has already agreed to help me look into bringing my father’s killer to justice.”

“Minsc agrees wholeheartedly for the removal of this painful curse and finding this Dread One and introducing Minsc’s boots to his posterior! But what is this talk about dead fathers? Is this another enemy who needs to meet Minsc’s mighty blade!?”

“Pretty much,” Harry said with a nod. He explained how he and Imoen had come to leave Candlekeep and what had occurred directly after that. Minsc and Garrick both exclaimed outrage at the idea of having been attacked like that out of the blue and Minsc went on to say that he would gleefully “help Harry find this large giant fellow, and cut him down to size after we rescue fair Dynaheir.”

“Which brings us back to something I need to say right now,” Jaheira said. “Setting all these new revelations aside, we cannot simply go after Dynaheir right now, Minsc.”

Evidently despite now being so much closer to being Harry’s friend was not going to stop Jaheira from giving her opinion and Harry actually found himself thankful for the fact. That, and the fact that he had not seen any kind of deference in even Imoen. It was one thing to be able to track how their relationship, whatever it was, was changing over time. It was an entirely different thing to have his AA Skill somehow gave him control thoughts and actions.”

Minsc seemed to swell up at Jaheira’s words once more, but she went on calmly. “Going after Dynaheir right away is folly! We were hammered in that fight, Khalid and Imoen and Garrick are all out of arrows, our armor has been battered to near uselessness. I mean look at Harry’s!” She said, reaching behind the log she was sitting on to pull it up to see to let everyone see it.

It had several large tears in its side, and the undercoating of chain mail which protected his legs had also been bent and battered.

“Khalid’s is no better,” she said primly setting aside. “If not for taking a halberd from one of the gnolls we wouldn’t even have a weapon for you and Minsc, let alone a longbow, a shield, armor or even a helmet.”

“Yeah…” Harry said slowly. “My helmet… forgot about that.” His helmet had been torn apart and then dumped in the river during the fight.

“Furthermore, I have already used up all of my healing spells today!”

“But if we don’t go after the gnolls right away, won’t the trail get cold? And every day we wait, is a day that is putting Dynaheir’s life in danger. We have no idea why the knolls took her, why they wanted to take both her and Minsc alive at all. That can’t be good, whatever the reason,” Harry said.

“I am not arguing that we need to go after them, or that this Dynaheir life is worth the risk. I am saying that we are in no position to do so!” Jaheira said angrily.

“We can heal ourselves by waiting a day,” Harry argued back, waving Minsc quiet. He knew that Jaheira would not respond well to fiery rhetoric, only calm logic. “In fact, we probably should, in order to figure out where to go if we can’t pick up a trail.”

“That is an impossibility,” Minsc said bluntly calming down since Harry was not agreeing with Jaheira. “Minsc knows that he himself left a trail behind. My berserk state is not exactly the most subtle of things in moving through the woodlands. We can find and follow that trail if nothing else.”

“All right, but we should still rest at least we are agreed on that,” Jaheira said. “But that does not help solve the issue of supplies! The only ones of us who have suits of armor are myself and Garrick, and neither of us are front line combatants. My chain mail can protect me true, but Garrick is wearing studded leather armor, not exactly frontline material.”

“Actually,” Imoen said speaking up for the first time in a while. She wasn’t exactly all that comfortable with big, serious reveals and such like. “I think I can help with some of that.”

“What do you mean?”

“One of my blood mage spells allows me to repair items. It was the first one I figured out in fact, since I accidentally destroyed a vase back in Candlekeep.”

“In that case we have a plan,” Harry said firmly, staring at Jaheira. “We’ll rest here another day, let Jaheira use her spells while Imoen, you and I try to use our Blood Mage spells are our damage.” He held up a hand, still looking at Jaheira. “We can’t always go into every battle as prepared as we would like you of all people should know that and your objections have never been about whether we should do this, just about whether or not we are ready to. But ready or not, I think we need to do this. Don’t you?”

After a Jaheira broke their stare off and then quirked a smile at him, nodding. “Far be it from this particular lady to say that another lady does not need rescuing,” she quipped. “Very well. Over my strenuous objections, I will agree that if we can rest here another night, we should be in a decent position to at least follow Minsc’s trail. I have no idea whether or not that means we will be able to rescue Dynaheir though.”

“Excellent!” Minsc she said with a shout, getting to his feet. “In that case, I will go and find the trail now, and will also hunt for red meat to add to our next meal. These fishes were magnificent Harry, but I would like to see what you can do with venison, or pork.”

Harry chuckled that, and Khalid stood up to. I’ll go with you. Despite wh, wha, what my wife said, I st, st, still have a few arrows l, le, left. So if y, y, you see a d, d, dear, I c, c, can bring them d, d, down easily en, en, enough. Although even th, th, that would be easier if your m, m, map could help us.”

“Sorry,” Harry said with a shrug. “That’s a little much for my map. Predators it’ll show them yes, but not herbivores.”

“While they’re gone,” Jaheira said looking over at Imoen. “Let us see what you’re repair spell can do. And how much it takes out of you as well. That will of course be considerations as well.

**OOOOOOO**

Elsewhere that same day, a Conjurer and his followers were under attack. “Begone, you irritating little creatures!” A blast of Magic Missiles came from the tip of the red-cloaked Conjurer’s staff, slaughtering several of the creatures, none of whom had the health to stop more than two of the missiles, which he launched forward in a batch of seven.

At the same time, one of the Conjurer’s companions, although he would never use that word, hirelings would be the term he would use, went down gurgling with a sword slid up under his chain mail. Two more started to break, their courage failing them.

Seeing this, the Conjurer shouted, “Do not think for one moment that you will survive betraying me and the Red Conjurers of Thay! We will hunt you down and use your skin to make spell books!”

As he spoke, the Conjurer’s hands had never stopped moving, and when he finished haranguing his followers, his hands flashed, and he was suddenly enveloped in a skin-tight force field just in time to stop the swords of three of the little xvart creatures from impacting him and possibly even wounding his person. Their blades bounced off, and he sneered at them from under his hood. “As I suspected, you imbecilic creatures do not seem to understand what magic is, let alone the mighty spell Immunity to Normal Weapons. Regardless, you have attempted to wound my person, and that cannot be borne!”

Another wave of one hand this time, and a far shorter gesture sent a blast of searing fire out from one hand as the Conjurer used Agannazar’s Scorcher. This spell seared through all three of his attackers, as he quickly turned in place, catching each of them with the tongue of flame in turn burning the top of their bodies to ash.

However there were more than two dozen of the little creatures, and they had gotten far too close for the Conjurers liking. “Damn that woodsman. ‘I can spot a track or a trap at a league’s distant’ the moron said, but look at the situation now. I am surrounded by incompetence and Neanderthals! It is well enough he was the first to die else I would have made his death a lingering one,” The Conjurer muttered, even as he pulled out a scroll.

The next second, he sent out a concussive blast of force from his body, the spell, Concussive Blast, sending the attackers nearby skittering backwards. It didn’t do any damage, but it gained him a few more moments of uninterrupted time. During that moment, his last two followers died, although they took five more of the xvarts with them, and wounded several more.

He supposed that meant they were worth more than the worthless Ranger who had led them right into this ambush. Nonetheless, it left him alone against more than ten of the tiny creatures, and he knew that his immunity to normal weapons spell would not last long. *Calmly, calmly, a man of your intellect cannot be overcome by such as this so long as you use your intelligence to good effect.*

With that in mind, the Conjurer began a spell, creating another shield around himself of blue fire. This spell covered his person then was swiftly absorbed within it, and ‘immunity of fire’ rang in his head the words briefly appearing before him as they did in response to his cast spell.

Then, his hands began to twitch and flash again as the xvarts fought amongst themselves for the loot on his flunkies bodies or attacked him. They honestly seemed to believe he had run out of attack spells, and that it was only a matter of time before his defensive spells failed.

“You poor deluded little creatures, do you think you will be getting out of here alive?! Allow me to educate you on the reality of your position in relation to one such as I!” The Conjurer growled, then gestured forward with both hands down almost at his own feet. “Fireball!”

The fireball hit and combusted, spreading instantly all around him and catching every living xvart in the area roasting them alive within seconds. A few of them were at the outskirts of the explosion and were able to run away a few steps before collapsing, the pain of immolation being too much for their minds to comprehend, their bodies shutting down. And soon they too were turned into greasy stains on the forest floor, while around them, the fires on the trees started to gutter and slowly go out.

Sighing, the Conjurer walked around slowly, looking to see if any of the hangers-on that he had brought with him had anything material that he could use. He found their food, which obviously he’d been forcing one of them to carry rather than himself. After all, he was a superior Conjurer, why would he carry something of that sort? But much of it had also burned with the rest, save for a few items held in the buffoon’s Item Box, released upon his death. *So, I have food enough for one for several days, and wine too. Good. Foraging is not among my many and myriad abilities.*

Standing up from one corpse and showing no concern about the body or the charred flesh smell, the Conjurer taking stock of himself and the area around him. “Deep in the woods, with much of my magical spells expended except for three magic missiles spells, and one rainbow spell,” he murmured. “Not a good position to be, it must be admitted. Nonetheless, I will forge on. Perhaps I can find another group of imbecilic simians to do my bidding soon enough. Certainly that last group was not exactly hard to find.”

With a course decided upon, there remained the problem of the moment: he had little spells left for the day, and his shield spell would be going out in another ten minutes by the clock. “Yes, ten minutes,” he mused after pulling a small, extremely expensive looking watch from a pocket. “As in everything else, my sense of time is excellent. And as such, the choice of what to do with the rest of today is, alas, made for me.”

With that, the Conjurer moved forward, looking around him as he left the battlefield behind. With eyes untrained for the forest, it took him a while to spot what he wanted, but after several hours of mindless wandering he finally spotted a tree, with many branches he felt he could climb, and with an area two stories or so up that could, in a pinch, hold an individual hidden among the boughs for a time.

It was incredibly demeaning for the Conjurers to have to climb up tree like some ape, but the red-wearing Conjurer was a practical man to a certain extent.

Once in the tree, he gasped for a few moments, shaking his head. “Perhaps, hah, I need must, hah, do some upper body exercises, hah, at some point. While a true Conjurer should never be forced to defend himself with mere physical skill, it does pay one to be in good shape. And women do tend to like men who are back in better shape after all as well. It would not do for one like myself to need to pay for the company of the opposite sex after all.”

With that thought, he took out his Conjurer book, and began to reread his spells, thinking hard about what spells he would need, committing many once more to memory as every Conjurer had to on a daily basis once they used their spells, and then going over new ones. Once that was done, he pulled out his wineskin and took a deep drought, before chewing on some of the food, and leaning back in a philosophical mood.

“Things could be worse, but so long as I can get a good night’s sleep, I believe I can carry on as I wish tomorrow. But I must get some sleep. Even a Conjurer as puissant as I in the magical arts must admit to the need for rest.” With that he closed his eyes, and despite the sun still being high in the sky, settled in to try and get some sleep.

**OOOOOOO**

The next day, the group headed southwest, with Minsc and Jaheira working together to try and find a trail. At first this was relatively easy. As Jaheira was quick to point out while they moved through the brush following the trail Minsc had created in his mad escape. “You barreled through the woods like a mad beast,” she remarked, shaking her head. “Your berserker abilities seems to be an incredible combat skill, but not one to use for overlong in the woods.”

“Minsc will take that as a compliment for his wild escape will now work to lead us to his Witch!” The barbarian Ranger exclaimed.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Harry said from his own place in the column. Jaheira and Minsc were ahead, with Khalid and Imoen behind and Garrick and Harry in the middle. Occasionally Harry would stop as his newfound woodcraft ability activated, and he saw wild onions, or other such legumes. When that occurred, he would go off the beaten path for a moment to grab them, before returning quickly.

“That’s a dangerous word to use Harry, thinking,” Imoen said, with a faint shudder. “Still lay it on us.”

“We know that none of the gnolls who had come after Minsc survived the attack,” Harry said indicating his head with one finger as if any of them had been able to run, he would have seen them doing it. “But, what if there were some of these xvarts with them only they gave up the chase? They might be waiting for the gnolls to return, which can easily lead into their attempting to ambush for us.”

“Which means following Minsc’s trail would in fact be the worst thing we could possibly do,” Jaheira said slowly, scowling. *That should have occurred to me and Khalid. And we cannot blame that on our curse! Even beyond that, we, no, I have lost my edge.*

“I’ve been thinking much the same thing,” Imoen said with a nod. “However, I anticipated that your map skill would be able to spot them if they tried to ambush us.”

“I would’ve thought the same thing up until we dealt with those spiders Beregost and saw how they were able to ambush us,” Harry said, to which Jaheira nodded as did the others who had been part of that battle. “I think we need to get off this trail, parallel it rather than follow it, and I think those of us who can use Hide in Shadows, or in your case Jaheira Forest Melding, should. That way regardless of anything else, they might come in overconfident at least.”

While he had worded it as a suggestion, everyone else took this suggestion as a command and Imoen instantly activated her Hide in Shadows ability, with Minsc following a second later. Harry could still tell where they both were though thanks to his map

“Ah, another thought occurs to me,” Jaheira said, coming out of her own Forest Melding, causing Harry to start. She had disappeared from his map the moment she was out of his line of sight and stayed that way when hidden under her druid skill. She smirked at him but said nothing about that, instead looking around at the others. “With us out of sight, and in possible enemy territory, we need to have a signal that will not give our location away. An animal noise perhaps.”

“How ab, ab, about owl noises?” Khalid asked. “W, w, we have used such be, b, before.”

“A specific owl noise would be better. Two precks and then a hoot?” Harry asked.

“Owls do not ‘preck’ Harry,” Jaheira said.

“Snowy Owls ‘preck’,” Harry said with a tone of certainty in it. “Trust me on that.”

Minsc nodded agreement, and after one look at Harry Jaheira simply nodded, and the group began to move forward once more.

With Minsc and Jaheira both in the lead hidden under their respective skills, the group continued on through the woods now rather than down the incredibly beaten and slashed path that Minsc had created in his mad escape. As they walked, Harry engaged Garrick in conversation, trying to get a better handle on his Bard ability, how they differed from his sorcerer spells, and where they were the same.

He already had an idea of the efficacy of the bard class spells. His Song of Regeneration was incredibly useful and had helped both during the battle and this morning to help build up their hit points. Indeed, without it, Imoen would not have been able to use her *Repairo* spell as often as she had been forced to in order to fix up their armor. Imoen had not been pleased to learn that the Repairo spell was of limited utility in this world, and the hit to her health was a full fifteen health points per use.

*Not,* Harry thought to himself morbidly *that our armor is really in that get a shape despite that.* Khalid’s full plate mail had taken several nasty hits and Harry’s had a large rent in the side of it. Much of that damage had been repaired, unless actual material was missing. So Harry’s armor still had a few rents in it, and there had been no saving his helmet. The metal of the helmet had just been completely torn away and had then been lost in the river.

However, they had been able to recoup their losses in arrows by going over the battlefield as they passed through it. Harry had also made a point of collecting an ear off each of the gnolls they had slain. That would mean a pretty profit once they reached Nashkel, even if they didn’t add any more to their count, which they would be.

They had even learned something new about his shield that morning when Imoen had tried to repair it in turn. Because it’s durability was down to ten out of twenty and Harry had hoped that Imoen and his *Repairo* spell would be able to bring that durability back up. But they had gotten instead a warning, saying that +1 weapons and shields could not be repaired except by the blacksmith who cast the spells in the first place or a by an equally skilled smith who could remove the spells and then re-lay them into the metal.

Needless to say, Harry was a little annoyed by that. His Tower Shield +1 had served him extremely well up to this point. But given the battering it’d taken in the last battle against the gnolls, who knew how well it would handle a battle against who knew how many more gnolls?

Regardless, Imoen was certain that she could have repaired a regular shield, as she had done to Harry’s chest plate, Khalid’s own shield, and his full plate. It was just that her magic was incompatible with the magic already on the tower shield which made it so much better than the norm.

But his conversation with Garrick went much better that afternoon. The other young man was willing to take Harry’s advice on spells and had told Harry in turn he could use up to level four spells, though he didn’t have many. He had replaced his two emergency backup spells, Shocking Grasp, with Melf’s Acid Arrow and would memorize the new spell later that day. That gave him four spells that could be used offensively: Acid Arrow, Agannazar’s Scorcher, Prismatic Spray and Grease. The last he could cast twice, the others once each.

On top of that he had his bardic songs, which, like spells he could only use a set number of times, had changed too: he had replaced two spells that had a chance of letting him charm any enemy listening with two more Songs of Regeneration. This gave him one Song of Haste, one Song of Courage and three Songs of Regeneration.

But Harry’s conversation with Garrick broke off abruptly as he spotted a red dot at the outskirts of his map, and he whistled lightly in the manner to call the others back.

Minsc and Jaheira soon returned as Imoen and Khalid bunched up from behind. When she arrived, Jaheira dropped her cloaking skill first, one dark blond eyebrow rising in question as the Ranger and Thief followed her example. “Yes, oh omnipresent authority figure? What have you discovered?”

Harry rolled his eyes at her gentle ribbing, before pointing forward. “My map just detected an enemy out there, I wanted to warn you.”

Jaheira frowned, staring around her into the Woodlands, then nodded brusquely. “I suggest that you two and Imoen and Khalid change position in the column. That’ll put three of us forward that the enemy can’t see.

“let’s do a bit better than that.” Harry said with a nod. “Imoen can join the two of you forward as a group, while myself Khalid and Garrick move forward on our own. If that is a xvart and there are others around in ambush, they’ll wait until we’re in position and you can ambush them in turn. If they aren’t, you’ll be able to tell what they’re doing before we get within sight of the creature.”

“Sound planning,” Jaheira said with a nod gesturing Imoen and Minsc forward. *Hmm, is this Harry’s Tactics in action, or is this simply his own tactical brain. Regardless, I should be interesting to see what he can do when battle is joined. And it just occurs to me that I am rather the odd woman out here, being unable to see the other two or be seen in turn by them or Harry. Still, needs must and all that.*

The three of them once more faded into the woodwork as Minsc’s voice carried back to Harry through the forest. “Minsc does not believe in all of this sneaking and skullduggery, we are not hunting for the pot after all but hunting the evil that lurks within every forest! It must be excised with the swords of justice!”

*He’s a little over-the-top, but I can’t help but like the guy,* Harry thought to himself with a chuckle as he took up position between Garrick and Khalid. The three of them continued forward, this time shifting their line of advance past the red marks on the right, skirting them just out of sight.

As they did Harry saw the red dot joined by three more, then a further four. A few minutes later as he directed Khalid and Garrick he watched on his map as those for dots started to move. They were not moving towards them, but rather across the Adventurer’s own route.

Several minutes passed as Harry continued to watch the dots move, then he held up a hand, and signaled Garrick and Khalid to quiet as they moved forward. He even pulled his cloak tighter around himself and put his sword away in his Item Box. It was the party’s last spare longsword since both of the ones Minsc had used in the fight had shattered, but with the addition of Cleave to his combat skills, Harry had shifted back to it, despite the fact that it was that he had begun to like his Warhammer simply because it didn’t break. *I still have more skill with my sword anyway.*

Then the xvarts turned outwards from their previous course through the woods. It soon became apparent that the xvarts, who were on patrol perhaps, would be coming into sight soon.

Harry looked around, trying to use both his Woodcraft and his Tactics ability to figure out where to hide. He eventually saw a dip in the ground to one side full of small bushes. He moved towards them. He gestured down into the tiny area, and when Garrick balked, Harry grabbed his shoulder and said in his ear, “it’s a patrol, if we hide, the others might be able to follow it back to wherever they’re coming from.”

Having heard the whisper thanks to his half-elven hearing, Khalid nodded, and the three of them crawled under the bushes, hiding there, their cloaks over them and their heads and faces hidden among the bushes. And it was not a moment too soon because a bare few minutes later, the xvarts came into view.

When they did, it was all Harry could do to not laugh aloud. They were short creatures, thin of body and only coming up to his waist, wearing oddly decent looking clothing and holding short swords in one hand. They moved quickly, their heads swiveling this way and that as they moved. But what was the oddest thing about them? They were indeed, as the more experienced adventurers said, blue. Not only were they blue, but it was a glean, almost crayon colored light blue, with big, round ears sticking up from their heads. They also had mouths full of sharp, almost eel-like teeth, and seemed to chatter to one another in low tones constantly as they moved.

*Smurfs. Evil…smurfs,* Harry thought, staring at the sub-humans and trying not to shake his head and give his position away.  *Good grief.*

Xvart:

Small, blue skinned creatures, which may have come from a universe where blue skin is the newest and greatest thing ever or be Ao’s idea of a giant joke, much like the rest of creation only a bit more pointed in this case. Small. Squishy. Somewhat intelligent as they can actually organize their own farms and communities, unlike goblins, who rely on following other creatures who can think for them. Only dangerous in numbers.

Attitude toward Adventurers: Cautious Aggression. If an Adventurer shows himself strong enough to frighten them they will retreat without any hesitation. But if not, they will attack.

Weaknesses: All of them. Seriously, xvarts and goblins aren’t smart, aren’t strong or durable or particularly quick. Except in large numbers they aren’t dangerous to anything but low level Adventurers. As a group though they tend not to care about losses unless it’s clear they have lost the battle.

The next few moments were very tense as the group of eight xvarts passed by them. It wasn’t tense as in Harry thought that the little creatures were an actual credible threat against the three of them. No, it was tense because he could not stop his mind from replaying the few Smurfs episodes he had seen as a child spying on the TV from his cupboard under the stairs and twitching because of it and his traitorous imagination wondering if Dudley would have liked a show staring these beasts better than the originals.

Despite his mind going down such odd roads, Harry noticed the xvarts seemed to be looking around themselves with some seriousness and also knew the lay of the land quite well if the way they moved through the forest was any indication. But they didn’t spot the three hiding adventurers in the bushes, and the patrol passed them by without an incident.

Harry waited, watching until they were out of sight on his map, then slowly pushed himself out of the bush.

Imoen appeared then, so quickly and silently that it nearly startled him backwards despite having seen her dot close in. “Imoen! Don’t do that,” he hissed in a loud whisper.

She laughed, shaking her head. “That was great thinking Harry,” she said with a smile, pulling him to his feet and then reaching down into the bushes to help Garrick and Khalid. “Although, you might want to have a nice long bath with some aloe leaves later on, and wash your clothing too.”

“Why?” Harry asked, suddenly wary.

“Because when Minsc spotted you Jaheira nearly burst out laughing,” she replied with a chuckle. “She had to hide herself behind a tree for a moment because she come came out of her Merge with Forest technique. Apparently, you all decided to hide in the bush that is known as this area’s equivalent of poison oak I think.”

“Oh… drat,” Harry said mildly despite his growing concern, shaking his head. He could already feel the desire to scratch at something rising within him, and that was pure idiocy. He hadn’t had any actual skin showing, not even hs face had touched the bush.

“You r, r, realize, that telling us t, t, that was actually going to make it w, w, worse didn’t you?” Khalid asked dryly, his own hand straying towards the small of his back for some reason.

“Yep.” Imoen simply smiled brightly at them all.

Harry rolled his eyes at that. “Thanks Imoen, really. As if I didn’t already have enough mental issues with us running into a race of evil Smurfs.”

“I know right!?” Imoen replied, laughing before she pointed down south towards where the xvarts had disappeared from Harry’s map. “Jaheira and Minsc are trailing them, but Jaheira felt that you all would need at least one person who can Hide in Shadows just in case.”

The four of them continued southwards, trailing after the patrol hoping that they were heading home rather than simply continuing its rounds.

Soon enough that turned out to be the case. About a bare hour later they came out of the forest into a slightly more open area. It was open simply because the land had slowly started to change, becoming rockier, less rich, leading up into a series of large, stony hills.

As they did, Minsc and Jaheira made their own presence is known. “An excellent plan Harry!” Jaheira said with a smile, unvarnished approval in her eyes, enough that Harry found himself smiling back for a second. “I believe that we have found their base of operations, indeed, we have found an entire xvart village.”

Harry looked at her quizzically, and she gestured to one of the small mountains rising to one side. “There’s a trail there leading up into some kind of hidden valley or largish grotto up in the hills. They have guards up there obviously, so we did not follow them in, considering that my hide in merging forest technique was bound to fail the instant I left forest, and sending a Lone Ranger into such, would be the height of idiocy. But Minsc followed them until an elbow in the trail and saw a palisade and some huts beyond.”

“Indeed I did,” Minsc said, his voice for once not booming. “There were many of the little creatures as well. Four were on watch on the palisade, and others moving beyond so many they could have threatened even Minsc accompanied by his mighty companion Boo.”

Harry frowned thinking. “Do you think the rest of us can get close enough for us to look up this trail of yours without being spotted?”

“They don’t seem to have any watchers out watching the approaches or up in the hills above their village, although as I said they have guards up the ravine,” Jaheira said with a shrug. “Still, I believe we could get to the elbow where I turned around before at least. Follow me.”

The group continued on, and the ravine was just as Jaheira had said. It was a wide pathway about the width of a large cart leading up into the hills before taking a sharp right. There they were able to hide out of sight of the xvarts on watch, letting Harry’s map do its work, as well as his AA skill as a whole, because as he reached the elbow an irritating notice went up in front of him, Imoen, Khalid and Minsc.

Warning, you have entered an Enemy Zone. An Enemy Zone is an area where creatures spawn at intervals and will attack anyone entering the range.

These areas vary in difficulty, and can be either a source of good experience, or a good way to die prematurely. Be aware of which is which.

“What is this?” Minsc asked, looking over at the others.

Harry briefly explained what an Enemy Zone was, and how they had run into two such before. “It means that even after we clear out the enemies here, they may, may respawn somehow.”

Blinking Minsc looked down at Boo on his shoulder contemplatively. “Hmm… how do xvarts and others spawn naturally anyway? Minsc has never heard tell of a female xvart or goblin.”

“They capture females of any other species: elves, half-elves towards gnomes humans, even female orcs, if they can. And then they breed them. Their young gestate in a matter of a few months rather than nine as it would be for other races. The women so captured die in childbirth, their bodies unable to sustain them,” Jaheira said, her tone making ice look warm in comparison. I have seen the aftermath of such. To say the minds of the women are broken is to grossly misuse the term. They are simply destroyed, mentally and physically, they never recover.”

“Kobolds are r, r, rather more live and let l, l, live, they have females o, o, of their own, and lay e, e, eggs. But xvarts, goblins, M, m, mind Flayers, and a few o, o, other species do n, n, not,” Khalid said, his voice hard.

Listening to this, Harry winced. “W, well, regardless the village being an Enemy Zone means that there will no doubt be more enemies than we might think otherwise. And since I’m seeing at least 25 enemies up there, maybe more. I can tell that number pretty well though, because the red dots are spread from around…” he counted off thinking about distances on his map and assaying a guess. “Maybe fifty feet around the corner here? Minsc?”

Minsc nodded seriously. “For one such as Harry or I, it would take us fifty paces to reach the palisade where the tiny creature’s guards are.” He looked down as Boo squeaked and he added hastily, “Boo is not disparaging for their size Boo and you know it. He is making fun of them for their evilness and silliness. One would have thought anyone would know they should post guards at this elbow where we are now, not just at the entrance to their village.”

Harry nodded firmly. “In that case, I think we need to estimate at least twice again those numbers. Remember, my map can’t look inside buildings.”

“No because that would be too broken,” Imoen quipped, elbowing him in the ribs lightly.

Harry chuckled, and put an arm around Imoen’s shoulders, squeezing her gently but his voice was serious as he went on. “We have to assume that each of those huts could be used as a spawn point. That means the xvarts will get reinforcements even faster than those kobolds we fought before.” He scowled, thinking and looking at the trail leading up to the xvart village. “I don’t suppose you had time to scout around the foot of these hills did you?”

None of the others answered, and he nodded. “All right, let’s see if we can do something about that. Either retrace our steps to go around on to the other side of the hills, or follow them on this side.”

“You’re looking for another way up I take it?” Jaheira asked.

Harry nodded and the group of them moved on cautiously, they were in enemy territory after all. And now that they were out of the forest, Jaheira fell back with the others, leaving the Ranger Minsc and the Thief Imoen to scout around them.

In the end, they were able to find a small defile, a dry streambed, leading up into the hills. Although to call them hills was a bit of a misnomer. They were more like jagged teeth of stone thrust out of the land their sides stony and unscalable for most of their length. Even the streambed was tough going, but Minsc proved to be highly capable climber, and with Jaheira’s tangling vines conjured up to actually give them some rope, albeit short-lived, they were able to make progress.

Eventually, they reached a slightly flatter area hidden among the rocks and crags of the hill. There the riverbed broke in two, one portion enlarging and going downhill through the heavier rocks, and another fork leading towards the village on an almost flat line. They were about to take it when Harry spotted something unusual: a dot blinking blue and yellow on the edge of his awareness to the north.

“That’s interesting, there’s a traveler out there,” Harry said pointing in the correct direction.

“A lone traveler, this close to a xvart town? That seems bizarre to me. He must be an adventurer,” Jaheira said with a nod.

“That makes sense since his dot is blinking red and blue as if he could be friend or foe,” Harry nodded his head, looking around at the others. “Do you think it would be worth it to try to recruit him? After all, if he’s in this area, he might be after the gnolls or the xvarts for his own reasons.”

“I still say that name for that species is like a sneeze,” Imoen muttered, before nodding her head. “I say let’s do it.”

Jaheira shook her head, as did Khalid. “A chance meeting like this might not be chance, and even if it is, that does not mean that the person you meet will be a welcome acquaintance.”

Garrick nodded toward Imoen indicating he agreed with her, and Minsc shrugged. “The mighty Ranger will go with whatever Harry decides, he has proven to be most quick with thinking ahead, like the war leaders in Rasheman. Even Boo thinks highly of your plans, though believes that your cloths will need to be cleaned most thoroughly of the oils from the scratchy bush.”

“All right, Garrick, Khalid, Jaheira with me. Imoen, Minsc, can you scout along the other riverbed? I want to know if it goes where we want it to, and if the end of it is guarded if so.”

“From what I know of xvarts which is quite a bit, they are somewhat lazy. They might know of it, but be convinced that no one would be able to get up here. After all, it took us several hours of hard effort to do so,” Jaheira said.

Harry shrugged, but repeated his request. “Better safe than sorry after all.”

Jaheira simply nodded at that, and the group separated into two groups once more. Garrick, Jaheira and Khalid followed Harry down the other side of the series of hills, which was a lot easier than the side they’d gone up. That sort of annoyed the two young men as they commented on it, but then they came to what once must have been a waterfall, a sheer rock face leading down that they had to carefully scale down. Still, even that was easier than the dry riverbed they’d climbed up.

When they reached the forest floor again, Harry looked around at the others, making a point of catching Garrick’s eye. “Remember everyone, not a word about my advanced adventurer skill, or anything else I can do that’s above the norm. If we have to we’ll explain about my map, but nothing else.”

“Agreed,” Jaheira and Khalid said as one, with Khalid not even stuttering for once.

Garrick frowned, shaking his head though. “I don’t understand what’s so important about keeping your AA Skill a secret. I mean I understand it’s a big deal, but surely sharing that information with other people, especially if we might be recruiting to them to fight alongside us would be a good idea. And this fellow’s an Adventurer, surely he’ll be trustworthy.”

“Not unless we know we can trust them,” Harry said sternly.

“Indeed,” Jaheira said. “In fact, why don’t you remain as silent as possible? That way, you won’t have to perjure yourself, and, you won’t have opportunity to share the secret.”

At that Garrick simply nodded, and Harry wondered about the bard. For a class that was supposed to be pretty much a loner, able to become a jack of all trades, Garrick was very much a follower, willing, perhaps even eager to follow orders. It was weird, just as weird as his attempts to come off as more experienced with girls at times, which Imoen had thankfully broken him of.

With that out of the way, Harry led the group forward. Soon enough the man was in sight, of the two half-elves. Khalid let loose a loud bird call, and as the figure, who wore a red cloak with a hood, turned, Harry waved his hands towards the man. The man looked around him sharply, then nodded towards them, and moved in the same direction.

As he came closer, Harry saw that besides his gaudy red cloak, he wore a necklace made of large squares of gold and embedded with jewels, and what looked like some kind of ringlets on his fingers. In one hand he held an elaborately carved staff. *So a sorcerer or mage then. One without the sense to wear something that might let them be less than a freaking target in the forest, but he’s a magic user so I’ll take what I can get.*

“Greetings,” the man said, not removing his hood. “I take it from the fact that you are using common animal calls rather than shouting that you are intelligent enough to know that there are sub-humans about? Were you attacked by those irritating xvart as well?”

Harry nodded, making no sign of what the advanced adventurer skill was telling him about the man in front of him. It was enough though that Harry decided not to open the journal entry about the man just yet.

**Name**: Edwin Odesseiron.

**Race**: Human

**Gender:** Male

**Class**: Conjurer level 7.

Relationship status: cautious wariness. 0/4000 Respect, 0/4000 Trust.

Edwin doesn’t like you, trust you, or in any way respect you. But don’t worry, that doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that he wants to kill you or anything, that just means you are not named Edwin. Seriously, this guy might not be as blindly stab happy as others you have met, but he makes up for that in a riotously out of control ego.

Beware extending any trust to him before building up respect. In fact, respect, or even fear if you can manage it, would probably be the best way to go with this fellow.

“We are, although were not actually here for them. Were on a quest to rid the area of gnolls,” Harry said, not mentioning anything about their specific quest, something both half-elves picked up on instantly while Garrick frowned in some confusion. “They are apparently allied with the xvarts, or more likely of have simply convinced them to go along with things rather than be wiped out.”

“Indeed such is the way of most societies when one is intelligent enough to see the levers of power,” the wizard replied, before turning aside lightly and murmuring as if to himself “The annoying over-involved muscle seems to believe that I care overmuch about the xvarts in the area, and yet he did say something interesting didn’t he? One wonders if he actually knew.”

With that he turned Harry and the others. “A quick question, you mentioned something about gnolls? Have you had dealings with the dog faced folk? You see, I am searching for them myself.”

“So are we, hence our interest in the xvarts. We don’t know where their base camp is, that’s why we’re thinking of destroying the xvart village, because we believe that they will have that information.”

“If they are working together, that is indeed a credible idea,” the wizard replied, as if Edwin was loath to give compliments of any sort to other people. Given the brief introduction to his character that Harry’s summary had given him, that was probably spot on, Harry reflected.

“In that case I will lend my magical strength to your cause for the moment,” Edwin began. “They might have the information I seek as well about a prisoner that the gnolls took near the road leading north from Nashkel.”

Harry nodded slowly, frowning as he wondered whether or not this was coincidence, or if this wizard was seeking Dynaheir as they were, and if so, why. *Hah, Imoen would say there’s no such thing as coincidences, and I think I’m beginning to agree with her.* Still, adding a wizard’s power to their group was too good to pass up, so he nodded. “All right, you can join us for now. Come on, we’ll lead you back to the rest of our band.”

Edwin blinked, looking at the four of them. “It is not just the four of you?”

“No, we still have two more, who we left to scout out the village. We’ve already found a back entrance up to the valley they are hiding in.” With that, he led the way back to the hill then up the dry riverbed, causing Edwin to narrow his eyes. He was able to keep up with them, though he was gasping doing it.

Soon they were at the top, and Edwin scowled at him. “And was there a reason why you forced me to take such a road?”

“Attacking from the front is stupidity,” Harry said bluntly. “We wanted to see if we could find a way into the valley where the xvart villages without having to fight our way up the same entrance they used.”

The man scowled, but his actual irritation seemed to have lessened. “That makes some sense I suppose,” he said, in a tone that implied that he was astonished that such was the case.

Harry simply nodded showing no umbrage to Edwin’s attitude. He was used to even more condescension than this thanks to Professor Snape back in his old life, and more than one of the Seekers in Candlekeep hadn’t liked him or Imoen either.

About thirty minutes after their own arrival back at the intersection of the different dry streams, Imoen and Minsc came back, coming out of their Hide in Shadows techniques to look at Edwin quizzically. “Another stray Harry?” Imoen asked with a grin on her face. “Heh, and another guy too. Man, with Khalid and Jaheira paired off, it’s like I’m travelling with my own little harem.”

The wizard pushed his hood back to glare at her. He had a somewhat aristocratic face, cold and haughty, the kind of face that Draco always used to tried to assume, but never quite could. It was somewhat spoiled by the fact that besides the well cared for goatee and beard, he also had a nose ring connecting one side of his nose to his ear on that same side of his face. He had long hair, as a lot of men apparently did in this day and age, falling to his shoulders, kept out of deep set black eyes by a simple metal circlet. “I am no stray girl,” he said harshly.

He paused, his lips twitching into a small smile over his goatee as he he looked at her and then the three other human men around him. “Nor am I mere pleasure slave. And even if I was, judging by your present company, I would have to question your tastes even if you are looking to upgrade to such a fine specimen of manhood as I, as well as whether or not you were free of disease.”

When Imoen winced and held up a hand to indicate a touch, Minsc growled angrily, interrupting the repartee. “Grrr…I know who you are. You have some nerve, appearing before me like this when you and yours have dogged our steps for so long. You pose a threat to fair Dynaheir, one that would be my pleasure to buttkick!”

“As if a mere Neanderthal like you could ever even touch me,” the wizard said, even as his free hand moved to the small of his back and began to gesture as he prepared to conjure up a spell.

“Enough,” Jaheira and Harry said as one, before looking at one another.

“Jinx!” Harry said quickly, before leaping forward, causing Jaheira to roll her eyes. “What is this about? Minsc, you say you know this man, and he was after you and Dynaheir? Is this true wizard?”

“It is, and if you are working with him and his Witch, then I am afraid that we are at an impasse,” the wizard replied grimly.

Imoen’s hand suddenly grabbed his wrist from behind, and he jumped, trying to get free even letting his staff fall to the ground, but she pulled his arm up and around, twisting it. Her short sword appeared in her other hand, pressing up into his chin. “I like Minsc she said conversationally. “I’m not certain I like you yet, so let’s keep a civil conversation going, m’kay?”

“It was he who threatened me first,” The wizard said haughtily, as if he hadn’t been about to start sending out spells like they were going out of style.

“I’ll note you didn’t deny Minsc’s charge. Why were you searching for them?” Harry said crossing his arms. Wanting to add a wizards power to their party was all well and good, but certainly not if it came at the cost of Minsc and his trust.

“Why does it matter what he wanted with her, he was after Dynaheir! He is as much of an enemy as the gnolls,” Minsc argued.

But Harry shook his head. “Let’s have the wizard speak for himself.”

The wizard shrugged, and seems to calculate whether or not he could get away with a lie. But Imoen had shifted her hit grip so that her thumb was resting on the veins on his wrist. “And don’t try to lie to me pretty boy, I’ll know.”

The wizard huffed. “You are a most contentious wench aren’t you?”

“Yep,” Imoen said cheerfully. “And you’ve only just begun to know me too. Now answer Harry’s question.”

Edwin rolled his eyes at that, but he had already calculated the odds against him before Imoen had taken him captive like this and found them wanting. *Given the range at the moment I doubt I could get more than one spell off, if that. And considering that they have a Bard of their own, that might mean that my shield against normal weapons will not be enough.*

“Very well, I will inform you of my mission. I am Edwin Odesseiron, a Red Wizard of Thay.”

At that Jaheira and Khalid both scowled, while Harry just nodded, having thought that might be the case. Garrick and Imoen both looked confused, and Harry explained, using knowledge he’d picked up back in the Candlekeep library. “Thay’s a nation to the, the north of Baldur’s Gate I think. It’s a magocracy and the Red Wizards act as almost a noble class there. The Red Wizards are somewhat notorious for seeking out unusual magics as well… and…”

“And Thay has been at war with my homeland of Rasheman numerous times! They take my countrymen as slaves for their games and fell magics, but have never been able to make much headway against the lodges of Rasheman thanks to our fighting prowess!” Minsc said proudly.

Looking over at the two Harpers Harry cocked an eyebrow in silent query. Both more experienced Adventurers nodded, indicating that was indeed the case and Harry turned back to their possible prisoner. “Okay, so we know why there’s bad blood between you. But is that why you were after Minsc and Dynaheir? That seems a little too… well stupid, coming out to the Sword Coast just to hunt two Rashemani on their Dijeemma, or whatever the Witchly equivalent is.”

“It is not.” Edwin scowled, then went on more slowly, obviously choosing his words carefully. “I was… shall we say at loggerheads with some of the more senior members of my Order. I was… informed… I should pursue my studies out in the wider world. Then, when I was leaving Thay, I was…given a choice of aid on my journey that I could not ignore.”

“Out in the wider world in the sense you are exiled?” Harry asked shrewdly. “Or out and about for a set amount of time to allow tempers to cool?”

Edwin grimaced. “The head Neanderthal seem to be more intelligent than most of the breed,” he muttered to himself, eliciting a laugh from Imoen behind him.

She released his arm, but the wizard knew she was still behind him with a drawn blade, and the Bard had also begun to ready a spell, if the militant way he was holding his balalaika was any indication. “Atrocious choice of instrument,” he muttered staring at it for a moment before looking around at the others.

“Oddly enough that is the first thing you said since we arrived here that I agree with,” Jaheira said with a scowl.

“Yeh, I’m right here you know,” Garrick said holding his weapon to his chest. “You guys just don’t understand good music.”

“Yes we do, you just haven’t shown a us any” Harry said with a laugh, before turning back to Edwin. “And what was this mission you were assigned?” He asked, shifting the conversation along considering his last question answered by Edwin’s grimace.

“…The power of precognition is one that the Red Wizards have long sought to understand, along with many other wizard societies the world over. In our case however we live right next to a country home to hundreds, perhaps thousands of trained precogs who can use their powers very effectively. That power has helped the Rasheman barbarians destroy every army or even large company sent into their nation. There are many among us who would wish to capture a Rasheman Witch, but they are extremely hard to capture even on their own, let alone with their barbaric bodyguards. Yet it is felt that an… intensive study… of them could give us the clue as to how they are able to use their precognition so effectively.”

“How effective is it, really?” Harry asked looking over at Minsc, who was gripping the shaft of his halberd so hard that Harry could hear the wood begin to creak. “And if you break that Minsc, I’ve only got two more.”

Minsc growled, but nodded, releasing one hand from the shaft of the halberd to thump his chest, hard. So hard Harry actually noticed that he lost a hit point. “The warriors of Rasheman are famed for protecting their Witches, and the witches themselves are renowned for being able to spot trouble in the world. Many times on the steps of the barbarian world, they have spotted trouble arising, be it some local trouble, sub-humans looking to conquer or the Thayan wizards,” he went on glaring at the Red Wizard. “I have heard of even plagues being stopped by the potions of the Witch whose mind was filled with portents of such! Even Boo stands in awe of their ability to find trouble. And his little nose is drawn to evil like a magnet to a lodestone.”

Edwin’s face twitched, as he stared at the Giants Miniature Space Hamster that had just crawled out of the large barbarian’s armor. “The bald one speaks to a a rodent, and you give his words credence still?”

“Minsc and Boo seem to be a set package,” Harry said with a shrug. “And admittedly, some of what Boo has to say has made some sense.”

He looked at Edwin thoughtfully. “A quick question, is your mission to bring Dynaheir back in chains or to discover the means with which she can see the future, if that is what they really do, since it sounds kind of different to me.”

“Hmmf, bringing the Witch back was implied, but never outright stated. In fact, given my… troubles at home, I would much rather come to understand their precognition on my own and then present that to my fellow Red Wizards,” Edwin said, honestly for once. “If I brought her home, I would gain a somewhat well-place patron. If I bring back the information, I will have no need of such and will not have to suffer his control or inevitable round of back-stabbings and betrayals.”

“So… if you could come up with the information another way you would take it? Say, by a wizard doing a Witch a favor, like helping a band of adventurers rescue her? In return for a honest question-and-answer session?”

Harry knew that convincing the two magic users to put aside their differences would be a lot more difficult than that, but he hoped that his charisma would at least make the idea seem attractive. And who knew, with Harry and the others standing over them both with big clubs to make certain they played nice, maybe they could talk without trying to launch spells at one another.

Charisma Check passed!

Edwin has been convinced there’s a possibility logical discourse can give him what he wants rather than brute force. Astonishingly. Now you just have to convince the other half of this equation of the same thing…

The Red Wizard scowled, stroking his beard. “A study of her body and brain would be a more potent way of dealing with things, but your idea does have some merit. Practicality has it’s place after all. I would not have any pleasure in taking her apart thus after all.”

Minsc growled, and Harry grabbed the other man’s arm. “So, will you join us in rescuing Dynaheir, and ending the gnoll threat? In return, we will demand that she answer your question, as concisely and as honestly as possible.”

“Hmm, and after several days of being a captive of the gnolls, the Rashemani Witch is bound to be in a receptive frame of mind,” Edwin muttered to himself, nodding. “And it isn’t as if they would succeed without my magical prowess to aid them and their foolhardy plans. Very well,” he said in a louder tone, “I will agree to this.”

“Good,” Harry replied, releasing Minsc’s arm. Minsc did not look happy, and Harry noticed that he had lost a few relationship points of the man, whereas he had gained quite a few with Edwin. Evidently, logic and discussion was a way to go with Edwin, or was it just the practicality as he mentioned? Regardless, they had a wizard among them now.

“In that case,” Harry went on briskly, looking over at Imoen and Minsc. “What did you to find?

With a final scowl sent Edwin’s way, Minsc knelt down. With his finger he began to draw a map on the gravel of the trail of the dried riverbed, marking out the xvart village.

“The village has three large huts, almost as large as a log house back in Rasheman. It has a palisade blocking the main trail leading into it and a barricade here. There are trees and bushes growing throughout up to the barricades, although there does not seem to be any threats in the valley. The river comes out, or perhaps starts, here,” he said pointing to a place on the west, of his makeshift step.

“And they do not seem to know or care about it for some reason. It is not guarded, and we were able to make our way up to the edge of the cleared area around the barricade,” Imoen interjected.

“You’ve both used the word word barricade, instead of wall. Why?” Harry asked intently staring down at the map.

“Because it isn’t a wall Harry,” Imoen said with a shrug. “It’s just two wooden barricades set in an open area between the small group of trees and the village, about as high as a xvart.”

“And their numbers?” Harry asked.

“And are we dealing with just xvarts?” Jaheira cut in. “Did you see any other monsters?”

“We are not dealing with just xvarts,” Minsc said shaking his head.

“There are four gnolls among them, all of them Elites, like the tougher variety we face the other day,” Imoen supplied nodding. “And there’re about 35 maybe 40 xvarts around the village at all times, unless more are hiding in the hut,” Imoen went on earnestly.

“Alright, here’s what we’re going to do,” Harry said, scowling as he looked down at the map. “Jaheira had a point about how our supplies were looking before we decided to accept this quest. Even with Edwin added to our party, our armor is not very good and we don’t have any healing potions. On top of that we pushed forward so hard after breaking camp, that we haven’t rested since then. It’s nearly pushing evening now; I think that the best plan would be to attack the dawn, there is a reason why that’s a popular move after all, and I think, that what we need to do is to conserve our numbers, and any kind of direct combat.”

Harry paused there, scratching at his chin and noticing absently that he needed to find another razor somewhere. His last one, which he had bought at the Friendly Arm Inn, had not lasted more than a day after leaving Beregost, and he could feel some stubble starting to grow. “Edwin, what spells do you have?”

Edwin huffed irritably. “That is a rather rude question to ask someone who has simply joined your band for convenience’s sake, but very well. As it is in the interest of planning a better attack I will tell you of my might. I can use two Fireballs a day. I have two spells of defense, one summoning spell, and three Magic Missile spells. For close in fighting I have two Agannazar’sScorcher.”

Harry nodded, whistling appreciatively as did Imoen who muttered, “I am so going to dual class the instant I get a chance, I swear!”

Of course they had their Blood Magic spells, but Harry was in no way going to use them in front of Edwin, who huffed in snarky amusement at Imoen’s mutters. Not until the man proved himself trustworthy, and frankly Harry didn’t see that happening anytime soon given his attitude and the group he was a part of.

Turning his attention back to planning out their attack, Harry asked, “Good, so we can hopefully do most of our killing at range. Minsc, how close could you get with your Hide in Shadows skill?” Close enough to say get here, and offer some long range protection for Imoen?” Harry said gesturing to the edge of the small wooded area.

“Minsc can and will do so! But why are you thinking of sending Imoen in on her own? Neither Minsc nor Boo can approve of that.”

“Traps,” Harry said bluntly before looking over at Imoen. “Imoen, how good are you at trap laying again?”

Imoen shrugged and twitched her eyes, opening her Status Sheet page as Harry surreptitiously did the same, enlarging that thief skill for a moment. Since it, like Hiding in Shadows, was a percentage rather than level based skill, it was slightly tougher to get a handle on and it was not a skill that Imoen had practiced since leaving the Tutorial, or even that much during it.

“You can lay traps while under Hide in Shadows can’t you?” Harry asked looking over at Imoen, since that information wasn’t available on her Status Sheet. “I think I remember you being tested on that.”

“Yeah I can do that, so long as we have the materials,” Imoen replied promptly, already getting an idea of what Harry wanted her to do.

After examining it, Harry nodded. “We have the materials for at least a half-dozen traps, if we add in the grog you found on the gnolls we fought the other day. So, here’s what we do…”

**OOOOOOO**

The night was deep and dark when Imoen began her trek up the dry riverbed and into the valley, where she activated her Thief skill, Hide in Shadows covering her like a cloak. Minsc came with her, but they split off with Minsc moving into a position by a tree, as he pulled out Khalid’s longbow, laying an arrow along the string. He didn’t pull it taut just yet, but his eyes were scanning the area, and he nodded at Imoen, seeing her as a bare outline as she moved forward, marveling at that as he began to realize the party’s ability to see one another like this was very important. It made activities like this far easier.

Imoen moved forward, waiting on the edge of the lit area from the torches that were being held in the hands of the two xvarts on guard to either side of the single barricade, a bit of wall that barely came up to the height of the xvarts themselves. The interior of the village was somewhat decently lit too, but even there there were shadows.

“Let’s see how good you are at sneaking around Imoen over old girl,” she muttered, before pulling back into shadow. Once there, she breathed in deeply, and then used a spell she hadn’t used since comparing it’s effect to Hide In shadows, obscuring herself with magic on top of her Thief skill, grimacing at the hit to her health points. If she was spotted, those health points would come back to haunt her. *But then again, I don’t intend to be spotted, and shouldn’t with two techniques now covering me.*

With Hide in Shadows and her *Disillusion* spell around her, she wound her way forward, through the two low barricades and into the village, where she waited in the shadows, looking around. At night, the place was nowhere near as bustling as it had been before the sun fell. There were only seven xvarts awake, scattered throughout the area, and a single Gnoll Elite, sitting by the main firepit in the center of the village. The rest were presumably inside the large huts, their doors set toward the firepit. But the Elite wasn’t awake enough to be looking around, and none of the other xvarts were nearby.

With that in mind, she moved to each hut’s entrance and began to lay down traps. This was something, like Harry’s ability to instantly search a body for money, which she had played around with only a few times in the tutorial. As she began, Imoen saw a glowing set of diagrams in front of her, showing her how to lay the trap. As she constructed the trap the bits she set correctly would change, showing the outline of the bits she had placed correctly in green, or incorrectly in orange for a brief second. The trick was to spot the color before it disappeared, or else you wouldn’t know you had done so until you were finished with that particular trap. *I suppose the percentage of the skill effects how long I see the colors maybe? Or maybe the percentage comes in as people start to move across it, and the percentage shows how much chance they have to be caught?*

Regardless, the traps she could create were simple, traps that would trip anyone trying to come over them. But unlike the equivalent back in Imoen’s old life as Tonks, these traps would snare anyone who tripped them for a determined amount of time until the traps themselves were broken, rather than breaking or being seen after a single person went over them. Unless someone with a detect traps ability came along, they would remain hidden until the string broke.

From hut to hut she went, laying down traps in front of their doors. When she was done, she moved back into the shadows again, thinking hard as she renewed her spell, grimacing at the hit to her health points. *Damn, I need more health. That’d be endurance right? Have to remember to tell Harry to up that as often as I can.*

Regardless, Imoen knew she still had enough items to create four more traps: fire traps, traps that she had never actually made before during the tutorial but were based about the rotgut they had found on the bodies of the gnolls they had killed.  *Well, nothing ventured nothing gained. We’ve got more than enough rotgut to let me do this, and to prepare the rest too. And remember what Harry said old girl, no need to light the rotgut up in the trap itself, just set it so it spreads around.*

Imoen carefully began work on those, her fingers moving silently as she set the traps, mostly tripwires now tied to the flasks of rotgut, around. Since she didn’t have to set anything to light the rotgut on fire, the difficulty of the trap went down tremendously.

Eventually, she was finished, and moved out of the small village. There she slowly un-stoppered two more flasks of rotgut, pouring them onto the barricades. She couldn’t do much there because of the two xvarts on watch, but she was able to at least douse the bottom of the short wooden walls which would hopefully be enough.

A second later, she was off once more, meeting back up with Minsc without any issue. Moving back through the small copse of trees, they found Harry and the others waiting in the entrance to the dry riverbed, which was a large lip in the edge of the valley where the soil of the valley ended and the bedrock of the hill began.

There Harry was resting one arm on the lip, watching the village through the forest as best he could. He jumped most agreeably when Imoen and Minsc came out of their disparate Hide in Shadows abilities, although he didn’t look as surprised as his jump indicated. *He must be acting for Edwin. I suppose I can understand that, that guys not exactly trustworthy is he?*

“Gah, don’t do that you two!” Harry huffed, grabbing at his heart for a moment in a bit of over the top acting that had Imoen rolling her eyes as Harry asked. “Were you able to lay your traps?”

“All done,” Imoen replied with a nod. “I laid as many traps as I could without giving the game away. There are only about seven of them despite that, but six of my traps were set up directly in front of the doorways to the three hutts. Three simple trip trapes, then after them three makeshift grease traps. Then one trap near to the main fire-pit, a half circle caltrop trap using the bit of iron we had from the swords Minsc wrecked.”

Harry smirked evilly. “Great job Imoen. Now, Khalid, do you and Minsc believe that you could take out the guards?”

“We could take out the guards for certain,” Minsc said authoritatively, pointing them out. “But we could not take out the guards that are actually on watch on the main entrance. They are sure to hear any commotion in the village and raise the alarm, even if we silence those creatures still awake within.”

“All right, let’s do this.” With that, Harry raised himself up out of the ravine, then turned back and helped Garrick up, although Jaheira looked at him with one eyebrow raised in irritation and he backed away, holding up his hands placatingly. Edwin grumbled as he climbed up, but still did so with some alacrity and took his hand without complaint, with Khalid climbing up out of the riverbed with ease despite his full plate mail.

They were almost at the edge of the area when Minsc paused, exchanging a glance with Khalid, who frowned, fingering the bow he was borrowing from Imoen, the worst shot of the four who used bows, her short bow feeling odd, almost wrong in his hands. Still, there was some bleed-over between one bow type to the next, and he knew he could use it well enough. He, Garrick and Khalid aimed for the two guards, and at Harry’s nod loosed.

Unfortunately Khalid was too used to a longbow, and his shot fell short, impacting not the head of the xvart he’d aimed at, but its lower chest. It was still a kill shot, but not one that would kill right away. Garrick’s shot too, missed the mark, hitting the same xvart in the shoulder. Minsc’s shot was good, slamming into the head of his target. But the damage was done, and the mortally wounded xvart instantly started screaming out it’s agony.

In the center of the xvart village the Gnoll Elite raised it’s muzzle howling out a call to arms, and the few other xvarts, five still moving around the village and the two on watch o the main entrance began to move towards the screaming guard at the back of the village. The Gnoll Elite then began to bellow commands to them, as others slowly started to leave the huts, groggy from sleep at first but waking up quickly.

But Edwin, Jaheira and Garrick were already casting spells. Garrick played his balalaika, the notes of his Song of Regeneration carrying to all his allies as the other two summoned up their animals. Jaheira did somewhat better than Edwin at this, summoning up three wolves, dire wolves, larger and tougher than the normal breed, which she sent forward, after only a moment’s communion with them in order to dominate their minds. Edwin in turn summoned up a simple tree creature, but also sent it lumbering forward.

“Wait,” Harry said. “That thing’s too slow to go on the attack, keep it close as close in detection detail instead.” He idly wondered where the wording of that had come from, but he understood what he had meant to say all the same, so ignored it.

Edwin raised an eyebrow, then nodded. ‘A most intelligent plan, to keep your best assets so guarded.”

“More like my most vulnerable asset at the moment,” Harry said with a dry chuckle, to which the man looked mildly affronted, but didn’t reply further.

Instead, he did as Harry with had told him to, the tree creature taking position in front of him, muttering. “Hummf, regardless, this will put me in good position to turn on these adventurers if I so desire and they are weakened enough for such to make sense in the long run.”

Hearing that Jaheira scowled but said nothing for now, merely keeping an eye on the annoying mage.

For his part Harry moved forward, to place himself in one of the gaps left by the two barricades. He took the center most, with Khalid to his left and Minsc to his right. Once they were in position, with Imoen having reclaimed her bow, he began to rap out orders. “Garrick, Imoen, Jaheira, targets of opportunity. Edwin, hold for now. Jaheira, keep your beasts with us here away from the fires and with us here.”

As he watched, the xvarts had begun to run around, several dozen of them coming out of the various huts, but tripping the traps that Imoen had placed. From nearby, Harry heard a whoop of glee, and then a muttered “Bugger” as Imoen found herself out of her Hide in Shadows.

“It’s all right for now,” Harry said. “Stay behind us, use your short bow for now. We don’t need you to use Backstab.”

“All right, but remember we don’t have many arrows, only fifteen per person,” Imoen warned. They’d only been able to recover about forty six arrows from the battle against the gnolls. Garrick and Imoen had both been very profligate with them during the battle.

“It will have to do,” Harry said, grimly setting himself, and waiting as the xvarts began to form up. Harry waited, until they became aware of where the arrows slicing into them from outside of the barricades were coming from. Then, they all turned and as one roared forward, howling their war cries. Harry waited, then waited some more, then finally as the first xvart was about to reach them shouted. “A fireball right in the middle of their town if you please Edwin.”

Edwin smirked, and for once did not reply in a snarky manner, instead simply letting his magic do the talking, waving his staff this way and that as his voice rose in an incantation.

As the first of the xvarts slammed into them, Harry dipped his shield and took their charge easily, hacking the first to down with quick strikes, frowning as he realized how easy it was to do so. Nearby, he heard Minsc bellowing, thrusting his own halberd forward. Khalid waited another moment before lashing out, his bastard sword flicking in and out like a snake’s tongue.

Edwin’s spell soon finished the fireball streaked over their heads, aimed at the farthest reach that the wizard could aim for, where it exploded. And instead of simply blasting outwards, which would’ve been dangerous enough, considering the number of xvarts that had come out of their tents, it hit the modified grease traps Imoen had set. These now shattered, the contents of the grog having been spread all around by the xvarts already.

As such the fire spread, and more than one xvart fell screaming after the fireball had dissipated, staring down at the clothing and their feet as they caught on fire. Screams began and more of them began to die while still more boiled out of the huts. Harry slashed down, killing one xvart, then watching as several dozen were plagued by fear running away, the gnoll elite having died to the initial fireball blast.

Then more of the Gnoll Elites came out from two of the huts. One of them swept it’s halberd down, cutting through the traps that Imoen had left there and began to bellow orders in its yipping voice.

The xvarts who then came out of the huts started to become more organized. Instead of rushing forward to engage the enemies they could see they held back building up their numbers, until there were about fifty dots crowding the center and east of Harry’s map. Even the fires were slowly starting to be stamped out as the sun started to rise enough over the hill to give them more light to see by.

Seeing their numbers, Edwin needed no urging to conjure another fireball. But one of the xvarts, it’s dot indistinguishable from the others, reacted. It raised a staff, and the fireball spell that Edwin had just cast disappeared, bouncing off a spell of some kind.

Xvart Shaman has used Dispel:

Dispel is an active defensive spell that can cancel or negate a single enemy spell. It is usually used to break through an enemy’s magical defenses, but can be used to attack slow-moving offensive magic and is very quick to cast.

Weaknesses: can only be used on spells up to level 5.

“What!?” Edwin growled. “Y, you dare, to pit your pitiful might against mine! Delusions of grandeur need to have limits!”

“Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth?” Jaheira said from beside him.

“What does that mean woman!?” Edwin growled as he turned from the battel to send her a glare.

“There should be a limit to someone’s sophistry,” Jaheira replied, not taking her eyes off the battle but allowing her lips to twist into a sneer that would have done Edwin justice.

“Fallback,” Harry shouted, his voice cutting through the rising sound of the xvart horde, the battle and the incipient argument behind him. “Jaheira, send in the dire wolves, everyone, use long-range attacks for now.”

Minsc obeyed instantly, as did Khalid after a few seconds needed to disengage. The wolf Jaheira had assigned to his position had to help him, tearing at two of the xvarts who were trying to keep him in place, their hands grasping at his shield even as he slew them.

As they retreated, the xvart shaman cast another spell. A thing of like a cloud of biting wasps came from its tiny, gnarled hands, the buzzing noises.

Xvart shaman has cast Insect Plague:

This spell calls into being, a hoard of flying insects which will attack all enemies of the caster. Those hit lose a point of damage every 2 seconds regardless of their Armor.

Spellcasting within the swarm is impossible. Invisibility is no protection. Due to the suffocating nature of the writhing insect swarm, each victim must pass a Willpower check or run away in fear.

Perhaps a fire spell could ward off the insects? Or a shield of water or Earth defend against them. But other than that, this spell is a great weapon to use against magic users.

Jaheira cursed as she saw it. “Send your tree monster forward,” she ordered Edwin. He continued to glare at her, but she was unrelenting. “That spell is called Biting Insect plague I have seen it before used on a mage to deadly effect. Unless you want to not be able to shape another spell in this fight, we need to intercept it with something large enough to take the bees interest.

Realizing the older half-elf woman had a point, as much is he looked loathed admitting it, Edwin nodded, and gestured the ent forward.

It strode forward to take Harry’s place in the middle of the largest barrier, as the others regrouped behind it. As they did, Harry and the others continued to rain down death on the xvarts as they came, using the conjured animals to create a barricade that they could not pass just yet. But it was only a matter of time, and Harry knew it.

So instead of being pushed out of position, Harry shouted more orders, which were somehow heard by Khalid and Minsc and Imoen at the very least over the tumbled of the screams and shouts of their enemies. “Jaheira, can you recast your summoning spells when you’re wolves die?”

“I have one more Summoning Spell yes,” Jaheira said with a nod.

Harry nodded, and then quickly outlined what he wanted to do. “We’re not going to try to reform a line where the conjured creatures are right now. We’re going to let them out from past the barricades…”

“What!?” Edwin interrupted, gaping at him. “But that is the most natural defensive line. And if we light them on fire as we wanted to originally…”

“It splits our front line into three and gives them the initiative even if Jaheira is able to keep her animals under control with fire that close on their flanks. No, we’ll pull back and create a sort of concave curve,” Harry said outlining it in the air with a finger. “With the open end facing towards the village. Edwin, Jaheira, you’ll be the center, straight behind the central opening. Jaheira, Imoen, you’ll target that spell user.”

She frowned, but nodded, flinging her sling around. “Edwin, your job is to kill those four Gnolls, magic missiles only if you please. Garrick, another Song of Regeneration, then join Edwin with your bow. Once out of arrows you can join the line.”

Garrick nodded, and Khalid ordered Minsc and Khalid to the other side of the concave line. With his tower shield Harry was much better at standing his ground than either of the other close-range warriors, especially Minsc who didn’t have a shield. He had a tremendous range advantage against the short xvarts though thanks to his halberd, and with Khalid in close to defend any who got under his reach, the two of them would make a potent force on that side.

When the last of the creatures summoned died, Jaheira was already muttering the enchantments to some and more, and this time, they came in the form of a Panther, and a small wolf.

The small wolf moved with Khalid and Minsc to the other side of the barricade, and Harry and the panther took the other side of the now vaguely concave line. Garrick joined harry with bow in hand at first after having sung his second Song of Regeneration Spell, shooting his last two arrows before pulling out his short sword. This finished the concave line Harry had wanted as the xvarts finally pushed past the barricade, their own flanks protected by the solid stone of the hill all around the valley.

The barricades weren’t tall enough to stop Imoen and Jaheira from launching their long-range attacks over it, and the spellcaster died in seconds, and arrow impacting his shoulder just as it was about to finish a spell as a slingstone took it in the face. It squawked in pain, falling on it’s read, and the spell fizzled, backlashing instantly, covering the creature in stinging bus just as it had intended to cover the party.

Two more xvarts on either side of it died by the stinging of the bugs so summoned. The gnoll elites kept on shouting for the xvarts to rush forward but by that point, magic missiles were already impacting the head and shoulders of the them, and the rest of the xvarts had pushed past the barricade into the bag that the concave circle of the adventurers had created.

Instantly Harry saw several messages pop up in front of him, their outer edge lined in gold to signify their importance.

You have created a tactical formation, Concave Line.

While vulnerable to a more organized enemy, this formation, when correctly placed, can create an area wherein the enemies are unable to bring their numbers to bear.

+2 to every defensive skill or ability of party members. +1 to the same for allied combatants.

+2 to armor type of party members. +1 to the same for allied combatants.

The second one read:

You have created a Tactic: Killing Zone.

With the enemies being attacked from three sides, the enemy is unable to organize themselves properly to use their numbers against you. With that, the enemy will become trapped unable to disengage, becoming more and more disorganized.

All damage by party members will be doubled.

All damage dealt by allied combatants will be raised 25%.

The enemy will have a 50% greater chance of their morale failing.

The xvarts charged forward through the three breaks in their barricades, only to be attacked from the sides, as well as from ahead of them. This, as the AA skill had indicated, seemed to confuse them. They all slowed down, bunched up, looking confused as their numbers began to dwindle under the rain of arrows and stone from Imoen, Jaheira and Edwin now that the spellcaster was down.

Edwin without command added his own long-range attacks after a few seconds. An Agannazar’s Scorcher spell racing out to impact each of the two barricades, lighting them on fire and adding still more chaos to the xvarts advance. The fact they lit up in the center of the mass of xvarts meant the embers of the fire spread throughout them and so did the panic it caused.

Then the first few xvarts were on them, and Harry had no more time to look at the rest of the battle, smashing down the first xvart that reached him with a hammer blow, having switched out from his longsword. The decision had been an easy one, considering he wanted to be able to use Cleave later on just in case, and the xvarts weren’t exactly a worthy opponent of that kind of thing.

He blinked however as his first victim didn’t just die from the hammer blow to the head, it almost exploded upon the impact. *Damn, that extra damage isn’t just for show! Wow, I’m going to have to continue to try out new tactics in the future.*

The concave line, with the fire of the barricade within their horde causing chaos and fear, instantly began to tell. The xvarts still had enough numbers to swarm them if they could have concentrated them on any one portion of the line. But now a few xvarts were turning from the red of enemies to the yellow of panicked foes on Harry’s map, something he noticed even as he continued to kill.

The battle continued on from there for only a few minutes and then, the xvarts broke completely. It was as quick as that. One moment, only about a dozen of their dots on his map were yellow, then the next, there were only a few somehow braver xvarts still in the red. All the rest were now trying to escape, fear taking them like an odd kind of madness.

“Close!” Harry roared out instantly, somehow knowing without understanding how what he had to do. The enemy had broken, now to finish them.

A few moments later, it was all over. The xvarts had shattered, fleeing back into their village, but the adventurers were on their heels. All of them, even Imoen and Jaheira had switched out their long-range weapons for a sword and club respectively. Even Edwin got into it, using his wizards staff, slaughtering the xvarts now that they had broken.

As he slew the last xvart which had tried to escape down the passage, Harry looked around him in a daze almost as the sounds of battle faded to nothing. He soon saw the others were a bit in a daze too, or at least Imoen and Garrick were, the closest to them at the moment. The others, more experienced adventurers were simply grimly satisfied, exchanging nods.

Even Edwin looked happy for the first time since they met him, his habitual sneering face now settled into more of a smirk as he had when he bantered with Imoen, a light of satisfaction glimmering in his eyes. “That was an…acceptably run battle,” he said nodding towards Harry. “Your tactic at the end there, letting them out into a killing zone like that, that was most excellently done.”

Harry just nodded, staring down at his hammer, which was caked with blood and gore. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to blink as he hadn’t realized that Jaheira had come up behind him. Glancing over he noticed that Khalid had moved over to Garrick and Imoen. “He’s right Harry,” the half-elf woman said, squeezing his shoulder gently. “This was well done.”

“Then why do I feel numb rather than any sense of accomplishment?” Harry asked, his voice almost flat as the Gamer’s Mind tried to keep him from going into shock now that the battle was over. “This… that was butchery, not a battle.”

“It speaks well of you Harry that you refused to lose yourself in the slaughter,” she said, using the same sort of words as she had after the fight against the kobolds. “But do not let your kindness get in the way of realizing that this was a job well done.”

“I know it was, and I know I would do it again, even if it wasn’t necessary for our quest after what you told us about how these creatures breed. But…” he shrugged. “Don’t ever expect me to ever enjoy it.”

“Why would I ever want you to?” She asked, seeming to be honestly confused, and Harry smiled at that. The two of them exchanged a nod, and Harry noticed that he had one another two-hundred respect and trust points with her. *Quite prickly and standoffish on the outside, but almost soft and gooey on the inside of that’s Jaheira* he thought, although he understood that if he ever even attempt to say that aloud, she would probably brain him.

As Harry regained his mental equilibrium however and the last of the adrenaline left body, Harry’s mind once more was able to take in what his senses were telling him. And that was dominated by the smell of the battlefield, and he nearly gagged as the stench of the dead, burned and none reached him, along with other, equally earthy smells.

Khalid came over then, holding out a scarf. “H, h, here Harry, my wife h, h, has a bottle of perfume she uses b, b, but if you don’t li, li, like the smell of lavender, this is a mu, mu, much better idea.”

“Is that what you wear?” Harry asked looking over at Jaheira, more for something to concentrate on rather than the smell as he slowly tied the scarf around his nose and mouth.

Jaheira nodded, cocking her head quizzically, the beads in her hair clacking together very gently. “You’ve noticed?”

“Only once,” Harry said with a shrug, trying not to bring attention to the brief moment where he saw Jaheira as a half-elven woman rather than a married woman full-stop. “Imoen commented on it too though.”

“You actually have perfume?” Imoen said, looking at Jaheira almost hungrily. “Do you think I…”

“Yes child, you can borrow some, but only some. I don’t have all that much until we reach a city like Baldur’s Gate.”

“Still,” Harry said his voice mildly muffled now through the scarf. “We need to get going. I don’t think any of us wants to stay here very long do we?”

“Indeed not,” Minsc said, while the others all shook their heads emphatically, even Edwin. “The smell is getting even to one with such a strong stomach as mine, and young Boo is most distressed by it. As a giant space hamster you know he has a far greater sense of smell than any of us.”

Harry nodded, thinking as he looked at the three huts. They hadn’t burned very much, but if they wanted to find any information about the Gnolls, it was obviously going to be somewhere within them. With that in mind, and wanting to get out of here quickly, Harry began to give out more orders. “Alright. Garrick, Imoen and I will search one hut,” he said, picking one out randomly and pointing at it. None of them, after all, had anything to say one was more important than any of the others.

“Jaheira, Khalid, Edwin you take the other,” he said pointing randomly at another. “Minsc, would you mind going around and cutting off ears? Each xvart ear is worth five gold as a bounty, and we killed what, 75 of them, more? That will help refill our supplies after this quest is done.”

Everyone else nodded, and the group split off, though Harry was wondering at his own ruthlessness now that he was past his moment of introspection. *Still, I suppose they are already dead. What happens from now on doesn’t really matter to them.*

Inside the huts, however they did not find an empty hut as Harry had expected.

The hut was circular, its edges lined with a few scraps of hide or pale leather, or at least what looked like pale leather at first. At one end was a large table set to the side of a throne-like chair, with cheap, primitive plates scattered around the table. On the floor were countless simply bedrolls.

More importantly in front of the three adventurers were ten xvarts larger and stronger looking than their fellows with actual muscle showing on their wiry little bodies, and chain mail to go along with their short swords. They still didn’t have shields though, for which Harry was very thankful.

And in their center, was a dark blue-skinned, or blue-furred rather, gnoll. He stood a head taller than most, his eyes showing both intelligence and malevolence in their red gleam, and his shoulders were broader as well, his plate mail showing shoulders with heavy spikes coming out of them. In one hand he held a large two-handed sword, the sword looking like a longsword in his hand.

As Harry caught sight of them, two bestiary pages appeared briefly in front of his eyes, though he only read the first page rather than both pages devoted to the background of the beasts. The rest wouldn’t exactly be helpful at this point.

Xvart Elites

The equivalent of a chieftain’s bodyguard these xvarts are the strongest within the xvart’s community. However, if the chieftain is beaten in battle by a representative of another sub-sentient species, or even occasionally an adventurer of the Orcish persuasion, they will instantly shift their allegiance to the stronger individual.

The same basic resistances of xvarts apply here too. But be prepared because these creatures are a little stronger and a little faster than their fellows. Still not very dangerous to most adventurer groups except in large numbers, and they never come in such except as part of a Horde.

The next page read about the Flind, which turned out to be a subspecies of gnoll called Flind.

Flind.

These creatures are the true elite of the gnoll race whatever the title of the Gnoll Elites. Stronger, tougher, with a clear genetic advantage over even elites, these creatures were bred from birth as warriors, and then were thrown into battle after battle, coming through either victorious or at the very least alive, which, if you haven’t noticed up to this point, is much the same thing.

The Flind is the equivalent of a gnoll adventurer, in that they can use some warrior skills. This one seems able to use Cleave and two other skills you haven’t seen before, one team support and one direct assault.

Even as Harry banished the two bestiary pages from his eyes the Flind roared, and the xvart elites charged forward.

“Of course there had to be a catch somewhere after such an easy fight!” Harry shouted. He barely got his shield up in time to block a sword bow from the Flind, and it threw him onto the back foot before he set himself, battering the Flind’s large blade to one side with his shield and then hammering out with his hammer. But the gnoll did something that Harry hadn’t seen in no be able to do, instant parrying the hammer blow to the side with his blade grunting with effort.

Harry wasn’t surprised for long, but it was long enough for Flindf to fling his sword back in an arc, swinging down at his shoulder. Now was Harry’s turn to grunt as his short sword and shield technique moving his body for him to bring up his tower shield +1 above his head. The blow smashed down into his shield, pushing him to his knees.

“Back out! Imoen, cast a Bombarda then out with Garrick, let’s see if we can spread them out outside,” Harr growled, whipping his hammer out to tie and take the flind in it’s legs. It leaped backwards, but Harry then shifted his attack, using his still outstretched hammer to target a wide angle Stupefy that hit just as Imoen’s Bombarda flew from her own out flung hand.

Harry’s spell caught the flind and five of the elites, but the Flind threw off the spell and rolled to the side, evading on instinct Imoen’s spell which imploded among his followers. By the time he righted himself, Harry had retreated out the door of the hut, and the Flind howled in fury, gesturing his troops out to follow the adventurers.

Instantly one of them died to a longbow shot from MInsc, and then he was charging forward to engage them, as Harry continued to fall back. “Butt-kicking for goodness!” the barbarian bellowed.

There was no time to try to coordinate, the xvarts and the Flind were too close to Harry for that, and he was desperately parrying and dodging as they came out of the hut on his heels. He only shouted “Try to take them from behind!” But it was enough.

Two of them died to backstab from Garrick and Imoen as she appeared from Hide in Shadows, and the Flind was forced to dodge backwards from a blow from Minsc as he roared in. The Flind blocked Minsc’s halberd, his sword’s catching the end of the halberd and pressing it up and out. It then danced around Minsc and let loose a bellow, before glowing red.

Flind has used Shoulder Charge.

Shoulder charge is an easy to understand attack, basically being a charge with your shoulder, fast and powerful, but in a straight line. Dodging it isn’t easy if you are entangled with the individual doing it, but tripping the individual using the technique is easy.

This technique can be evolved into a greater skill at higher levels.

The charge slammed into Minsc’s side hurling him off his feet and away, then the flind was turning on Garrick, activating another technique, its hand and sword glowing. Harry was engaged with two of the elites at the time, but a quick pointblank Stupefy took them down and didn’t cost him much in health, and he charged forward using his own technique, Shield Bash.

The blow caught the flind as it brought it’s sword down, causing the flind’s technique to stop working. It’s sword still crashed down with punishing force though, shattering Garrick’s own short sword and throwing the other young man back onto his rear. The flind though recovered and rolled away from Harry’s follow on blow from his hammer, breathing deeply and letting out a thunderous howl.

Flind has used Support Howl.

All those allied with the flind will receive a combat bonus to both offense and defense. Support Howl can be countered by Silence or Dispel, and does not effect magical attacks, only physical ones.

Imeon tried a quick Backstab but was intercepted by two more elites. She growled, then was forced to back away as the two elites began to move faster than she could handle. “*Lacero*!” she shouted, and her offhand filled with her fire whip, and her Would-be Dominatrix combat bonus activated, allowing her to dance around them until Garrick was up again, having scooted back on his rear until grabbing up a short sword from a dead xvart.

Since Edwin was still in the other tent, Harry followed Imoen’s example, lashing out out now with a cutting spell. “*Defindo*!” The flind dodged again, the blaze of magic passing it by to one side but cutting the two unconscious elites in half where they lay.

The flind growled, its sword lunging out towards Minsc. But Minsc was able to block it, getting the haft of his halberd up between them before the flind could get much energy behind it’s swing. A bellow and the stronger Ranger twisted, letting the blade of the flind carry down into the ground where Minsc captured the sword with the end of his halberd against the ground. Yet the flind quickly punched him away.

Then Harry was on the flind, having finished off the two elites fighting Imoen. The flind turned but too slow now and had also prepared himself for a hammer strike, raising it’s sword. Instead Harry switched out from his sword his hammer to his sword, lashing out with an overhand blow shouting to activate the skill he had learned from Minsc. “Cleave!”

The shout apparently worked to activate the skill, and his blow shattered the creature’s sword before flashing down into It’s chest hurling it backwards with a massive wound running from shoulder to waist.

You have used Cleave, an advanced Warrior Skill.

With any slashing attack a successful hit will deal three times normal cutting damage.

The gnoll was still alive though, saved by the amount of impetus the attack lost smashing through the flind’s claymore. It instantly reached forward to grab Harry still outstretched arm, pulling a surprised Harry forward as it brought the ruined hilt of it’s sword, which still had more than a foot of blade, down towards his head. But that blow was blocked by Minsc, who intercepted it with its his own halberd. Then Garrick was there, stabbing into the thing’s face as he leaped up with his own short sword. “Just die already!”

The thing finally died at that, Garrick’s desperate stab, punching his blade deep into its skull. The flind then fell back nearly pulling Harry after him before he wrenched his arm out of it’s death grip.

“About, hah, darn, hah, time!” Garrick gasped, wincing a bit. “What the heck!? That was harder than the fight against the rest of the xvarts.”

From the other tent, Jaheira and Khalid came out, carrying a wounded Edwin between them, his skull looking as if it’d taken a hit. Behind them, four more elites came out. But without a Flind among them, and outnumbered, that group of elites didn’t last very long.

As the last one felt to his hammer, Jaheira glared at Harry, who had the decency to look sheepish, looking down at his own feet. She adopted a schoolmarm sort of tone as she asked “And, what have we learned today?”

“Don’t separate the party and send them into different buildings while in enemy territory, unless you know for a fact those buildings are empty,” Harry intoned shaking his head. “I’m sorry everyone, I didn’t anticipate they would have kept any forces back.”

*Although… I have to wonder if the reason they did is because of the whole Enemy Zone thing, and those huts being the respawn points. A final battle to eliminate their ability to respawn makes too much sense for me to ignore*, Harry thought, hiding a frown*. Damn it, what could that mean when we find the gnolls base, wherever it is.*

“No reason you should have,” Garrick said frowning as he looked over the village which now more closely resembled a abattoir. “I mean isn’t it kind of weird that they did?”

“It is in, in, indeed, but, perhaps the Flind that you k, k, killed kept the others b, b, back, anticipating the lo, lo, loss of the rest of th, th, them and wanting to ambush us?” Khalid asked.

“Or maybe the Flind was unwilling to brave the fires? Gnolls are still beasts after all, no matter how strong they may seem,” Jaheira interjected.

Harry nodded, although he had a nasty suspicion that his own guess was closer to the real reason.

Edwin frowned, looking at them all and shaking his head. “Bah, close yet so far. While both your reasons were part of the Flind’s strategy, that strategy started much more simply. This was about control.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked mildly before anyone else could ask the question far more sharply than.”

“Allow me to educate you,” Edwin said with a laugh as dry and acerbic as his tone. “The gnolls, as most governments do, rule through fear and terror among these xvarts. The xvarts follow them because the gnolls are stronger, no doubt having proven so by killing the local chieftain. The blue skinned one, the flind, could control them to a certain extent, but only through his own person and those of the other gnolls. Because I killed the other gnolls as swiftly as I did, as you commanded,” he added, looking at Harry and bowing his head mockingly. “The Flind lost the ability to relay commands to the horde of xvarts. Which might have meant he would have been faced with an uprising if he came outside and faced the tribe.”

“Moreover, there was the fire to consider. The Flind decided to keep control of the elites he could in an environment without fire, after we had hopefully been lolled into a false sense of security and dealt with the rest of the xvarts who might have rebelle. It was actually quite intelligent of the creature. A tactic we might have to be on the lookout for in the future.”

Harry nodded, not saying anything about his own thinking about the reasons for this last battle and looked at the other two huts. “In that case, let’s clear out the last hut before splitting up again,” Harry intoned seriously.

In the last hut they didn’t find any gnolls or xvarts. Instead they found a large bear, chained to the ground, in the center the center of what looked like some kind of barn.

When it attempted to attack them, Jaheira and Edwin had killed it with sling stone and spell. When the bear died though, something more important occurred because as it did, Harry got a message from his advanced adventurers skill, which caused him to smile even as Minsc started, glancing up at a message of his own with a wide beaming grin.

Congratulations, you have successfully cleared the entirety of an Enemy Zone including the Zone Heart!

This is the center of organization and willpower among the enemies. Guarded by stronger opponents, clearing the Zone’s Heart ‘kills’ the Enemy Zone for a set amount of time.

This zone will be clear for a full year before re-spawning begins. And it will be at a lower level even when it does.

Reward: +2000 XP to every party member.

It was the next message, which Harry, Imoen and Khalid also saw however that was the reason why Minsc was looking so pleased. Because the shared experience had leveled him up.

Harry quickly looked at his own status screen, and saw he was relatively close to leveling up too, another one thousand two hundred experience points and he would level up again, although it was only a bare nine hundred for Imoen. Khalid was a different matter entirely, since even though he couldn’t actually be called a high level fighter he was still technically a level 32 Warrior.

“Minsc has leveled up!” Minsc shouted, throwing his arms into the air with both hands on his halberd, whooping in delight. “Let the enemies of goodness beware, for Minsc will be even stronger!”

He then looked over at Harry and was about to say something before Harry interrupted him quickly, looking over at Edwin. “Right! let’s split up again and get out of here before the smell starts to get to us even with these scarfs Khalid and Jaheira loaned us. Edwin, you and Imoen explore this hut. Minsc and I will take the other tent with that had the flind in it, we’ll see if we can find anything that’ll lead us to the gnolls and then he and I will start cutting off ears again.

“Garrick, Khalid, Jaheira you take the the one that Jaheira and her group were investigating before.

A quick walk later Harry was once more in the first hut he had entered drink behind Harry, before crying out irritably. “Why has Harry not yet leveled up Minsc!?”

“Remember were trying to keep my AA Skill a secret from Edwin, Minsc,” Harry replied winking at the other man. “Just because we have, shall we say engaged his services, for the time being doesn’t mean we actually trust him.”

Minsc’s eyes widened, but he nodded looking a little crestfallen. “Minsc had forgotten that and so had Boo. But Boo will remember from now on even if Minsc does not. But, does that mean you will try to keep it a secret from Dynaheir as well when we rescue her?”

Harry frowned. “I… I don’t know Minsc. I’m sorry I can’t tell you whether or not she and I will get along, or she’ll want the two of you to leave or will prove as trustworthy as you. I’ll make that decision when I come to it, but I will meet her and decide with an open mind. That’s the best I can give you.

“That is more than enough,” Minsc replied with a nod and a proud smile at having been told he was trustworthy. “Thank you Harry and now, can will you level up Minsc? Minsc is interested to see what you will do with his stat points.”

Harry nodded, and opened his stat, frowning as he looked at it. As a regular, for a given value of regular, Adventurer, Minsc only got two Stat points per level, unlike the three that Harry and Imoen got as children of the murder-hobo. But that didn’t change what Harry wanted to do with them.

“All right Minsc, I’m going to tell you flat out I’m not going to add any more to your strength or other physical stats. I think those are high enough for now. What you need is more wisdom, Willpower, Intelligence and Luck. I’ll put one stat point into Willpower for the next four levels, and the other into either Wisdom or Intelligence, whichever you wish, okay? That way after a few levels you’’ll have built up a bit more of your own defense against mental attacks if something happens to Boo.”

“The idea of anything happening to Boo is horrifying one,” Minsc shouted, before going on in a quieter tone as Boo skittered from one of his shoulders to the other, chittering all the while. “Yet Boo is saying that your idea has some merit, since a smarter Ranger might have been able to see the gnoll’s ambush coming, before they attacked. Still, it is a pity that Minsc will not be any stronger just yet.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that, having anticipated an argument, and nodded at Boo with far more earnestness than any human should have nodded at a small hamster, even if that hamster was believed to be a giant miniature space hamster. “Well, thank you Boo.”

“Boo says don’t mention it. He says that Harry has been straight with Minsc so far, and will continue to do so. Ha, even Boo acknowledges that the two of us can be a mighty force for goodness!” Minsc shouted.

Harry smiled, and opened up Minsc’s status page for only the second time since they had met, working through his stats for a few moments, before he put the two points that Minsc had earned by leveling up into Wisdom and Willpower. As a warrior neither of those stats were as important as strength or his other physical abilities, but Minsc already had all of those in abundance, whereas his mental abilities were dangerously low. Harry estimated he would use the points Minsc earned by leveling up at least three more times to bring those up to an acceptable level before adding more to his physical abilities.

Harry nodded to Minsc, then looked around a thought just occurring to him. “You know, a thought occurs: what if the xvarts have booby-trapped anything in here I mean they didn’t seem to booby-trapped the ground, but that’s because they were sleeping on it. What if they booby-trapped the table or the chair? Or those, those um, bits of decoration on the walls?”

“Boo believes that they did not, he also believes that the throne is a bit too much for any little creature like a xvart and should be smashed to be used for kindling on general principle,” Minsc replied dryly.

He hefted his halberd, and Harry shrugged. “Go ahead big guy, that should show if there’s any hidden panels or anything within it anyway.”

Minsc smiled widely, hefted his halberd up, and brought it crashing down. As his halberd’s head smashed into the chair, two things happened. One, of course was that the throne chair shattered it’s back sliced in two and the seat smashed. This did indeed reveal that it had a fake bottom to it, the contents of which crashed open on the ground a second later.

And, much to Minsc’s consternation, the halberd’s head shattered as it crunched into the seat of the chair. He grimaced as some of the bits and pieces blue back into his face and upper body, not enough force to actually hurt, but certainly enough to sting. When the sound of the shattered chair faded, Minsc looked over at Harry, shrugging his shoulders. “I am sorry harry, Minsc sometimes does not know his own strength.”

Harry shook his head. “No, that’s been happening a lot unfortunately. Hence the whole Iron Intake Issue.” With that, Harry moved over to the table, examining its contents, but not finding anything of merit, he and Minsc moved to look through the contents of the hidden panel.

He found 485 gold, which he took, three gems, a fire agate, a lynx eye gem, like the ones he’d been stockpiling during the tutorial, and an emerald as large as his fist and already cut. Harry also found a map. It was a very crudely drawn map, but there was a marked trail on it, leading South, South West. “I think,” he said with a smile picking that up and holding it in the air “that this is what we were looking for.”

Outside, he found the others had already finished clearing out the village. They hadn’t found much: one spell scroll in a secret hollow in the cave, which turned out to be some kind of meeting hall, empty of anything but an altar at the far end, another seventy gold scattered around, and lots and lots of short swords. Harry added two of them to his Item Box when Edwin wasn’t looking, and Minsc picked up the halberd that the blue furred gnoll had been using.

Harry showed the others the map, looking at Khalid and Jaheira for their input.

The two of them looked at it thoughtfully, then Jaheira said, “I believe I remember a story, something we heard years ago, about a failed fortress or stronghold, three days out from Nashkel it was, straight west. Looking at this map it reminds me of that story.” Khalid frowned, trying to think of the same story, but shook his head when he was unable to add anything and Jaheira went on. “I’m sorry but I can’t tell you anymore. Although I do know that there is a place between here and there that we can rest safely.”

“How do you know that?”

“I was told by fellow Druids that there is a dryad in this area,” she said pointing down at the map further south and west, shrugging her shoulders. I’ve never met this particular dryad, but Druids and dryad’s have a semiofficial alliance between them. If I ask, she will give us shelter for the night.”

“And since we’re in technically enemy territory, that’s a good idea,” Harry said with a nod. “Unless we think we can get rid of the smell and fortify the valley here?” He asked sardonically, looking around at everyone. They all shuddered at the very idea, even Edwin looking disgusted at the very idea.

At that Harry nodded firmly, then gestured everyone to move towards the valley’s main entrance. “In that case, let’s get out of here. Jaheira, do you think you can guide us to this place?”

“I think we need to follow the map for a time. Once we get close enough that the forest can tell me more, I will be able to guide our steps,” Jaheira replied with a shrug.

Leaving the valley behind, Imoen and Minsc took the lead, the group forming into a column once more with Edwin joining Garrick and Harry in the middle, and the two half-elves moving to the back of the column. They talked quietly to themselves, as the three men in the center simply continued on, talking about the fight that had just occurred, with Harry asking the other two their impressions of how it had gone and otherwise whiling away the time to let their legs do the work.

**OOOOOOO**

“I must thank you for coming with me Remus,” Albus said, looking over at a younger man who stood beside him as they exited the Belgium Wizarding Authority Foreign Ingress station, the name saying exactly what the building was: a place where tourists or other travelers came into the magical portion of the country from other magical countries. “This is a kind of mission that a man should not take on his own, no matter how strong he believes himself to be.”

“Trying to hunt down a spirit is going to be difficult even with the two of us Professor, but you’re welcome all the same,” Remus said with a shrug. “Yet given who this particular spirit is, I couldn’t help but agree when you asked me for help. And to be perfectly honest, it will be nice to be involved with a wizarding society again, even if it isn’t that of the UK.”

Albus Dumbeldore sighed and nodded, reaching out to steady the younger man with a speed that belied his own age. The young man across from him, who did not at all young any longer, was obviously still suffering from the full moon, which was only two days behind them. Yet he was still proud, and after a second getting his feet back under him, he pulled gently away from Remus. “I’ll be better as we move away from the full moon.”

Albus nodded. “Still, allow an old man his foibles, and let us get some chocolate. Chocolate, cocoa, and I think a local biscuit.” With that the pair continued down the street beside, while Albus looked at Remus with some pride, and quite a bit of regret.

Remus Lupin had been bitten as a child and turned into a werewolf, but Albus had worked hard to get him into Hogwarts, the first child so bitten to attend. There Remus had made friends, James Potter, Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew, yet life had never been easy for the werewolf, who refused to give into his curse, fighting it every month for control of his mind and soul.

But after that fateful night when Riddle came for the Potters, Remus, who had slowly been ostracized by even his friends due to his status as a werewolf, had retreated from the Wizarding World entirely, doing what I jobs he could in the human world to get by. Yet even so, he used what little money he was able to save and Albus’s continued help, to continue his magical education beyond above and beyond what Hogwarts offered. That was laudable, as was the fact he’d earned a Mastery in Defense Against the Dark Arts. But it was very obvious to anyone who knew him that the toll his curse demanded was growing every year.

Still, that didn’t mean that he was helpless, and for all of his aches and bills, Remus remained one of the best wizards trackers then that Albus had access to. Especially in forests. *And since Riddle has retreated into the Białowieża Forest, I will need that help immensely.*

The two wizards moved down the magical quarters of Belgium, talking pleasantly for a time then Remus stopped and stared at a newspaper. Albus turned, looking at him quizzically, but Remus ignored him, moving over to take the newspaper from its case, absentmindedly handing over a few Knuts, as he stared at the moving picture on the front. Albus looked at it over his shoulder, and his own eyes widened in shock as he saw what was blasting out from the headlines: *“Sirius Black exonerated! Gross miscarriage of justice! British ministry under attack from within as head of DMLE leads witch hunt for the truth!”*

“I think,” he said frowning thoughtfully “I need to contact our friends back in Britain. Let us find a hotel, and quickly.

Remus nodded, seeming in shock, and Albus gently took his elbow, guiding him through the city streets. Even as he too considered the ramifications of this, as well as how in the world it had even happened. How had Sirius not been guilty? And if he had not been guilty, then who had been? Who was the secret keeper that night? And why had Lily and James kept it from him?

*Questions abound,* he thought to himself *but this far after the fact, I wonder if they really matter.* After a few moments walking while still guiding his friend, he looked at Remus and shook his head. *Now not for me, but for perhaps my young friend they will. I rather fear that our search for Riddle’s spirit will need to wait for a time. Still, a return to England can be made to work for me as well. There were hints of where Riddle learned about horcruxes in the first place to follow up on after all.*

**OOOOOOO**

At that moment in France a young girl was reading the same headlines albeit in French rather than Dutch like the two men, frowning thoughtfully. And yet despite their ages and the anger Hermione felt for Albus she came to the same conclusion as Aldous had. It didn’t matter really. *Oh, perhaps in the future if my own research hits a dead end, then I’ll reach out to the Sirius, if he proves trustworthy. This talk in the newspaper of him running after Peter Pettigrew certainly does not fill me with confidence.* “Regardless, she murmured, setting aside as she picked up one of her textbooks. “even if he does prove so, I still have a lot of groundwork on my own to do.”

“’ermione are you in ‘ere?”

Hermione blinked, looking towards the door, then flushed as she realized that she had accidentally piled up all of her current textbooks in a pile in front of her, obscuring her entirely from the view of whoever was at the door to her small room here in the Granger’s new townhouse in Paris.

“Um, yes Fleur,” she said, and watched as a silver hair popped up over the books, looking down at her.

Fleur had become a true friend to the younger girl, and the Granger’s house had become a place of refuge for Fleur in turn as she continued to deal with the fallout of her Veela powers at school. After exchanging a nod with Hedwig, the blonde girl looked down at her younger friend, quizzically cocking an eyebrow. “Is zis some sort of game, guess your ‘eight in books?”

Hermione shrugged. “No, this is just a week’s worth of light reading. I’m trying to determine how to organize my time going forward.”

Flower blinked, stared between Hermione and the pile of books, then back again. “A week? zis will only last you a week?”

“The wizarding books will, the others, depending on what they are I might go through them a little less quickly. Programming is not as easy as I had hoped,” she said in tones of gross understatement. “But I’m getting there,” the very, very determined 14-year-old nearly growled, clenching a fist.

She would find what happened to her friend at the very least, and if he was still alive somewhere out there, she would find a way to either bring him back or contact him. Hermione Granger was a witch with a mission, and she refused to give up. *Hmm… on second thought, perhaps I should reach out to Sirius after all. He would, if he’s really Harry’s godfather, no doubt like to hear stories about him. And he might have resources that I could use, or perhaps some more information on what could possibly have happened. My own research is hitting more dead ends than finding facts these days.*

Hermione blinked then as she realized that Fleur had asked her a question about classes. Soon the two were engaged in a deep discussion on charms and where the line between a charm and a DADA spell was, and Hermione shelved her mission for now. There would be time enough to consider how to move it forward later.

**OOOOOOO**

Harry and the others had traveled through the rest of the day before being forced to spend a very nervous night hiding in a small copse of trees that were slightly taller than the other trees of the forest around them. There they rested in the trees with the two half-elves on watch, neither of them needing as much sleep as the humans did. Yet none of them had gotten much sleep, even Harry and the rest of his party members. When he woke up that morning, the AA Skill told him he’d only gotten four hours of sleep, which was not enough for any spells or anything of that sort to have been memorized.

But as the sunlight of dawn hit him, waking him out of his AA skill fugue, Harry was unwilling to try to rest any longer. By his and Minsc’s estimate, it had been three, maybe as many as five days since Dynaheir and Minsc had been captured. Even if the gnolls were treating her as well as a human would a prisoner, that was a long time to be anyone’s captive. If they wanted to save her, they had to free Dynaheir soon, or else. The others woke up to the smell of him cooking breakfast down on the forest’s ground, with Khalid helping out, setting out strips of venison in a pan to be turned into jerky.

Edwin was the most irritable of a morning, but a steaming pot of mulled mead helped him. After a few sips he nodded appreciatively at Harry although his mutter of “I suppose even Neanderthals can get something right even if they insist on waking up at ungodly hours,” did not do him any favors in Harry’s eyes.

“I am getting the vague sense of a dryad nearby,” Jaheira said, frowning as she looked around standing beside her husband and Harry while the others continued to eat. “Odd, it’s not nearly as wooded as I would have thought for dryads to grow, but it is nearby. I believe…” she paused, cocking her head closing her eyes as she felt out the forest around them with her senses. “I believe south from here.”

“Then lead on,” Harry said with a nod.

The group set off silently for a time, some of them chewing on their jerky, others sipping at flasks of mulled mead, but eager to move on, and find someplace where they could truly get some good rest, before pushing for the gnoll’s stronghold via the map Harry and Minsc had found. Harry just hoped that Jaheira was right, that this dryad would be willing to put them up for a night. There was no way they were going to be able to rest this close to the enemy’s stronghold if not. Indeed, when they joined him for breakfast the two half-elves had reported that they had seen a patrol of 10 gnolls passing their hiding place by during the night.

Luckily, as they went on through the morning, Jaheira’s certainty continued to grow. “Yes,” she said more than once. “Yes, I can sense a dryad far more clearly now through the bones of the earth. Perhaps a little too clearly.” Now she and the other scouts started to be able to point out easier routes through the forest and still be able to find the scent, or trail whichever she wanted to call it, of the dryad.

But then her progress was interrupted as Imoen and Minsc having been ranging ahead of the rest of the band at the far edge of Harry’s own map skill, began to retrace their steps back to the rest of the company. The others soon caught up, and the two of them cut out their Hide in Shadows. “What’s wrong?” Harry asked

“There is a single gnoll coming, a large one, larger than even the elites though not as big as the flind we fought. He’s also gnashing his teeth and muttering to himself,” Imoen said with a laugh. “It sounds kind of weird too.”

“Okay, so why didn’t you to just kill him?” Harry asked, confused.

Both of the forward scouts shrugged. “Because it’s a lone creature I suppose,” Imoen replied. “No threat really.

Minsc simply shrugged his shoulders.” It was Imoen who spotted him, the creature was not close to Minsc until she came back to warn him. Minsc was busy listening to other noises in the distance.”

“Other noises?” Jaheira asked cocking an eyebrow.

“Yes, arguing voices of two men. Neither Minsc nor Boo could not make out there words, but they were coming from that direction,” he said pointing south and east.

Jaheira’s eyes narrowed. “That is the same direction I am feeling the presence of the dryad.”

Ignoring that for now, Harry looked over at Edwin. “I don’t suppose you have a translate spell, or you, Jaheira?” When they looked at him he shrugged. A lone gnoll could probably give us some good information if we could take him captive.”

“If we could get it to talk,” Edwin drawled. “Would a paladin like you be willing to use torture to get it to do so?”

“No, but none of the light gods say we can’t use misdirection or lying in order to trick our opponent into revealing something, do they?” Harry asked. *If they do, I might have to rethink this whole Paladin thing.*

“Indeed they do not denigrate such tactics, only the use of them in interpersonal relationships, although far too few young paladins realize they can think their way out of problems in such a manner,” Jaheira replied with a chuckle. “It is good to see that you have a wise head on those young shoulders.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Is that some new way to call me child or something? If so, I have other names I could call you in turn.”

The others all laughed even Edwin who didn’t understand the full joke there, but then Harry looked at her and Edwin in question. But both of them shook their head. “However, gnolls have been known at times to be able to speak common. If so, we can still interrogate this lone gnoll perhaps.”

“Let’s find out if it’s even possible then. Imoen, Minsc, Jaheira, cloak yourselves again, just in case this one gnoll isn’t actually alone. The rest of us will continue on and meet him face to face,” Harry decided. “The two arguing men, men being this far into the wilds, will have to wait until after.”

Harry’s guess about the gnoll possibly not being alone turned out to be the case. The gnoll in question was escorted by five xvarts, who followed him at a distance, almost acting leery of him. *If I didn’t know better, I would say that they’re not actually with him, rather they’re almost escorting him away from something behind them.*

The xvarts reacted instantly to the sight of the four adventurers through the woods, shouting and moving forward, moving around the gnoll to attack them. But the gnoll didn’t do anything, simply stopped in place, glaring at them.

Shrugging his shoulders, Harry hefted his hammer, still his favored weapon since they were still down to only one longsword, and Harry wanted to use foretain the Cleave attack for when it would be most useful. “Kill them?” he asked.

After the battle of five xvarts and four Adventurers in open battle came to its logical conclusion, Harry lifted up his hammer and rested it on one shoulder, looking quizzically at the gnoll, who had not done anything, simply watch the fight. As he did, he took the time to read off the bit of information his AA Skill was giving him about the creature.

Name: Ingot. Gnoll Veteran.

A step between Elite and Slasher, the Veterans are the equivalent of sergeants and sometimes champions in gnoll clans, respected but not as feared as flinds without their inherent natural abilities or the next level of training, the Slashers.

Given he has a name, Ingot is a very unusual gnoll, and should be treated with wariness despite his relatively low title. He also seems a little more intelligent than most gnolls, and is using a very odd looking halberd…

Now it spoke, glaring around at the humans as its voice came out in common. “You good fighterrrrs for weak pinklings. You going to Forrrrtrrress? Is good. You kill all gnolls there. All stupid!”

*Ok,* Harry thought, *this could be easier than I thought it would be*. “Did you have a falling out with them or something?” He asked, coming to what he felt was the logical conclusion.

Charisma Check passed! Even though he has just met you, Ingot has decided you are interesting enough to converse with. Just keep your questions concise and to the point or else he might lose interest.

“Falling out? Fell out of nothing!” The gnoll replied, the words mangled by his canine jaws but still discernible. I was kicked out! Me, Ingot, the greatest fighter of my clan, exiled! And only because wanted to each woman!”

“Oh really, what woman would that be?” Harry asked quickly.

“I think herrr name starrrrt with D. She speak weirrrrd, have strrrrange magics, dangerrrrous, but tasty looking. Ingot wants to eat, I go to eat, to roast alive, but otherrrrs say no! She must be kept, then sent on to allies.” The gnoll snarled, this time for real rather than as a mangled word. “Allies not trrrrustworrrrthy. Allies only using gnolls. Gnolls could crrrreate empire, but to busy sniffing the tail of the so-called of Masters! Fools, weak!”

Harry nodded slowly. “I see. So you wouldn’t care if we wiped out all of the gnolls there?”

“No! Kill weak, strong thrive. Is way of world,” Ingot said almost philosophically.

Edwin shuttered. “I find myself disturbed yet also intrigued in a vile sort of way. I actually agree with that statement.”

“And w, w, what exactly does that say a, a, about you?” Khalid replied.

Edwin sneered at him, but Harry ignored their byplay, looking at the gnoll in front of him as it continued to speak. “This one will gatherrrr followerrrs, followerrrrs to be trrrrrue to gnoll path. Ingot not weak! Ingot will show them all, meet with Ludrrrrug, kill him, take overrrr band, become chief of own new clan! Then will rrreturrrrn to Forrrtrrress and claim for self afterrr you leave. If you not win thrrrrough, I will finish job, then me will finally eat woman!”

“And where is this fortress exactly?” Harry asked slowly, as if not really interested in that, and certainly not interested in the woman Ingot seemed obsessed with devouring. He also noticed idly that every time he answered a question he passed a Charisma Check, which kept the gnoll talking. That was good as they were about to get to the most important part.

South Southeast from herrrre, you come to edge of sworrrrd Coast, therrre be a larrrge crrrag just on the other side of a long brrrridge. Brrridge be about quarrrterrr day trrrravel away. Therrre the forrrtrrrress be. Huge thing, made by humans long ago. It good place for gnolls, could be mighty empirrrre thing, centerrr of Empirrrre, whateverrr it be called.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is capital,” Harry supplied.

“Yes that!” The gnoll replied nodding his doglike head. “It be that after I take overrrr, kill those who would follow old Masters. Kill old Masters and eat woman!”

Harry nodded again, then said in a louder tone, “I think that’s all we need from him. Minsc?”

Minsc appeared behind the creature, lashing out with his halberd in a downward thrust that slammed into the gnoll’s shoulder from behind and cleaved straight through him down to his crotch. Harry idly noted that the giant warrior had used Cleave and had been able to activate Backstab, which was, as Imoen had predicted, a surefire kill shot on anything human -sized.

“Well that was interesting,” Harry said brightly as the body of the gnoll fell nearly cut in two in front of him, blood spraying nearly to his feet.

The others came out from behind their own hide in shadows technique, nodding their heads. “That was ingenious Harry the way you led him on,” Imoen said holding up a hand for a high five which Harry gave her. “Brilliant, bloody brilliant!”

Minsc blinked cocking his head to one side “how is what Harry did bloody? What Minsc did was most bloody, but it was talking about eating Dynaheir!”

“Yeah, I figured that your self-control would be fraying after hearing him talking about eating her Minsc,” Harry replied with a chuckle. “But is it just me, or does that halberd look interesting.”

It did indeed look odd as his AA Skill had told him. The halberd in question was large, larger than the one in Minsc’s hand, with a massive head to it, about a quarter again the size of a normal one, and it’s shaft was metal instead of wood. The head’s edges also shown with a blue sheen, which instantly showed it to be magical in nature. Harry picked it up, whistling at the weight of the thing. He was strong, for his level he knew it, but even so, this thing was heavy to him.

Unknown Halberd: though it is obviously not a normal weapon, beyond it being magical you cannot tell anything about this weapon by simply picking it up. The magic seems to be benign but who can really tell?

You have picked up an unknown magical item. Would you like to use identify?

Harry instantly indicated yes with his eyes and Harry watched as the first message disappeared.

It was replaced with:

Heavy Halberd: The Chesley Crusher

This famous halberd was first used by an ensign in Waterdeep’s fleet but has since been passed around for generations, but only to those strong enough to carry its considerable weight. The iron haft of this heavy polearm makes the weapon slow, but its sheer mass smashes skulls and shatters limbs with equal eas.

As implied by it’s name this halberd has an added weight to it, as well as a magical edge which gives its attack even more impetus and cutting force.

+6 to damage, piercing, cutting or blunt.

-50% to overall movement and speed of the individual wearing it unless the wearer has a minimum of 36 strength, with -10% added for every four strength less than that the wearer has.

“I think I’ve seen one of these before,” Harry said slowly, his eyes flicking over to Edwin. Two of the Seekers back in Candlekeep had halberds like this. They’re slow as molasses to use, but they have added cutting power. Minsc, you can have this, but I don’t think you should use it unless you are about to enter your Berserker state.”

Minsc nodded happily taking the weapon and stowing it in his Item Box.

“That was interesting, but do you really think a Neanderthal like him will be able to get that out of his Item Box in a timely manner in a battle?” Edwin snarked.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “Probably not, but we can all guard him until he’s got the time, and once that’s done and his strength has ratcheted high enough to use it without penalty, Minsc and that thing could be a nightmare for any opponent.”

“Minsc is already a nightmare for any enemy of justice!” Minsc shouted, but then nodded his head. “Yet he can always be more of a nightmare and thanks Harry for the weapon.”

“You killed him after all,” Harry said with a shrug.

“After the most intriguing semi-interrogation disguised as a conversation,” Edwin approved. “Now we know where the fortress is, and it is a bare three hours travel from here. Excellent. This is actually working out rather well, one wonders if there is another shoe to drop at some point?”

Harry shrugged at that, then looked over at Jaheira. “Could you continue to lead us to this dryad of yours milady?”

Jaheira smirked, nodded her head, and with Khalid behind aside her, led the way forward.

She soon led them to a hill, the same kind of hill that the xvart village had been hidden within, then around it’s feet until they found a small path leading up. But unlike the path leading to the xvart village, this path was lined with grass and trees dotted it here and there, which they had to move through.

As they moved, Jaheira began to smile, whispering something to Khalid in Elvish which Harry couldn’t understand. He simply nodded, bumping his shoulder against hers for a moment. A moment later Jaheira stopped and looked around her, breathing in deeply like someone taking a lung full of air after a long time spent holding her breath, before she smiled. The smile completely transformed her face from merely attractive to downright beautiful, something Harry noticed idly as he looked around wondering why she was smiling like that.

Imoen asked the same question bluntly, as she came up behind the other woman, draping herself across her shoulders. “What’s the silly smile for?” she asked, smirking at the half elf woman.

She rolled her eyes. “Can you not feel it child? These trees, each of these trees are thousands of years old! They are filled with the power of earth, the power of life.”

“They are indeed Druid,” said a new, melodious voice from one side. All of them turned, to see a ghostly image slowly emerging from within one of the trees. “My grove has been here for ages, since long before Baldur and his fleets came, long before the men of the south pushed north.”

The image was of a woman, a beautiful woman from what little could be told from the image itself, middle-aged perhaps, but the form was so wavy away from the face that her curves could barely be seen as a hint rather than reality. “Greetings Druid,” went on with a bow. “I would ask your business here, but first I must beg a boon of you.”

“Ask and we will grant it, Great Mother,” Jaheira answered for them all, bowing. Harry asked her later about the title, and was told that Great Mother, was simply a title given to any elder dryad of a Dryad Grove.

“My Grove is threatened,” the dryad said. “Two human adventurers have come here, and are threatening to cut my tree down. “I have used my Charm, but they somehow are protected against it. I have attempted to persuade, to lead them from this folly. Yet while they hear my words, it only eggs them on to destroy my tree more!”

Edwin blinked. “They ignore a Druid’s charm, truly?” He frowned thinking as he stroked his goatee. “They must be either heavily guarded against mental enchantments, or, gripped in some religious fervor.”

Harry shrugged. “Whatever the reason, if they’re looking to knock down this central Oak, then I think we need to stop them.”

Edwin nodded. “Indeed,” before he continued on in a lower tone, “if only to make certain that we have a safe place to rest for the night, and to perhaps see if this dryad is willing to…exchange services. It has been a long while since my last visit to a courtesan.”

They came out into a gorgeous looking area, a small valley, somewhat like the xvart’s valley, although that was instantly where the any comparison ended. Here the trees dominated, many of them looking like they bore fruit occasionally. The grass underneath was deep, there was the sound of water nearby, and Harry could glimpse a stream or maybe a pond to on side through the trees. It was all in all an amazingly beautiful and peaceful place.

This feeling was ruined a moment later they started to hear noises, the sound of two voices arguing, and the sound of chopping in the distance. At that sound, Jaheira’s face closed down, and her fingers began to twitch on her staff in a most disturbingly violent manner. They were still somewhat out of sight thanks to the trees when they finally began to be able to make out the actual words being spoken.

“And I’m telling you, this is the wrong tree, it’s too obvious.”

“What’s obvious mean? Use real words, Caldo!”

I am using a real word Krumm. It means… it means… it’s obvious!”

“How can a word mean a word!”

“Whatever, let’s just chop them all down. Maybe there’s more than one treasure.”

“Ooh, tha’s good thinkin’ but that means will be here even longer. And with all those dog men in the area, that’s not a good idea.”

“Why do I think we’re about to walk into something incredibly stupid?” Harry muttered.

“B, be, beecause you have working ears?” Khalid asked shaking his head. “G, g, good grief, they sound lik, l, like they were dropped on, th, th, their heads as c, ch, children. Many times.”

The others forbore to comment as they finally came out of the denser woodlands into a small glade by the pond. In its center was a massive, truly monstrous tree, so big around that you could think that a person could make a three story house out of it, and a goodly sized one too. Between the tree and it were, two men, with one of them poking and prodding at the other, as he hefted an axe, obviously about to take a chop of the tree again.

Krumm and Caldo, Level 6 Fighters

Yes, these two come as a pair. That is because their basic intelligence is so small, that even combined, they barely register as a human being, let alone Adventurers. To say that they have all of their stat points in strength and dexterity is to put it mildly. Although one shouldn’t deny the luck of the fool, for is it not often the case that the most foolish seem to survive when the more intelligent are less-favored by that most fickle of ladies?

Relationship: nonexistent. These two morons are not intelligent enough to know what the idea of friendship is, let alone anything else.

Warning, continued attempts to talk to these two will negatively impact your own intelligence and those of your party and Allied companions.

*I really hope that last bit was a joke,* Harry thought to himself as they moved into the small glade

“What do you do here!” shouted Jaheira in a voice like rolling thunder, mixed the sound of an angry goddess with an, admittedly impromptu, professor McGonigal impression that made Harry and Imoen both back away from the woman. Even Edwin looked a little startled, while Minsc blinked, and stared at her. Khalid simply looked proud. “How dare you defile a dryad’s tree!”

The two men turned, and stared at her, their faces somewhat slack. One of them, Krumm said, “She’s real pretty, you think she’s real too? Or is she another wood woman?”

“I don’t know,” Caldo replied, his tone a near drawl that made Harry’s brain itch. “She looks real enou’h to me, like she c’ld be one of them fancy elves though. Don’t they have some kind of thing with trees?”

“What thing? “

Don’t start that again!”

Jaheira continued striding forward’s with the others spreading out behind her. Both men noticed this, and unconsciously moved apart, the second man picking up a Claymore while the first man hefted two axes in his hands. This did nothing to dissuade Jaheira. “I asked you a question! To hear up what do you do here?”

“Wha’s it look like?” Krumm asked, gesturing back over his shoulder to the tree, which was slowly starting to heal itself rum his axes ministrations. “We’re here for treasure.”

“What?” Edwin asked disbelievingly. “What to do you in Neanderthals think you could find in a dryad’s tree?” He then went on in his habitual mutter, “I thought that might have been some kind of odd echo through the trees, but to hear that is actually what they are doing? I know that most of humanity is moronic by its very nature, but this certainly takes the cake.”

Caldo shrugged. “It’s got a wood woman right? Why’d pixies or sprits create tha’ she weren’t guarding a treasure? That’s logic that is said the second man with a nod. He looked at the adventurers closely. “You gots some big Fellers there, you reckon you could help us? The faster we chop it down, da faster we get out of here with da treasure before those dog men find us.”

“Funny thing,” Krumm grunted,, looking back over the tree. “They don’t seem to come here, but getting out of here with the treasure, tha’s almos’ as important as the treasure.”

“And what did the, the wood woman say of there being treasure here?” Jaheira asked, trying to rein in her temper with some difficulty. It was after all not something she habitually had to do or even wished to do. But starting a fight here in the sacred Grove, was wrong in her opinion, so she would attempt to give diplomacy a chance.

Caldo grinned, his face splitting into an almost comical attempt to appear sly crossing his face. “Well she didn’t say nothing ‘bout it, in fact, she told us there ain’t no treasure. But ya see, tha’s just what she’d say if’n there be treasure right?”

“…Astonishing,” Edwin said shaking his head. “I might have to write this episode down. It has been known for a long time that wisdom and intelligence can combine to aid one in throwing off Charm, and yet here we are, face to face with two examples at the other end of the spectrum who were able to do the same thing. Perhaps extreme idiocy can also be a defense to mental attacks? I imagine it would lead to a series of fascinating experiments.”

“Boo is normally not a giant space hamster who hates on-site, but he is telling Minsc that these two are too dumb to live. That is a phrase that Minsc has never heard before, and yet if they are trying to chop down a dry it’s tree, perhaps there is merit in the idea.” Minsc began, scowling.

“Two stupid to live,” Imoen quipped nodding.

“Ye’re alls just jealous dat we figured it out first,” said Krumm, before rolling his massive shoulders and flexing his equally massive arms. “But if’n youse guys keep on calling us names, we’s gonna throw you out.”

“Teach you a lesson we will,” Caldo said, also flexing his arms. While not as on display as the second man, were equally large and powerful looking.

“All right, that’s enough. The dryad of this tree is an ally, and as such, I will take it poorly if you continue to threat tree. Leave, and don’t come back,” Harry ordered. “There’s seven of us and two of you, even someone as… oblivious as the two of you should be able to figure out what how this battle ends.”

It turned out, that they couldn’t. Or perhaps it was the word oblivious that threw them.

“Squish their heads Krumm!” Shouted Caldo, pointing his sword at them, and the second man roared towards them, both his axes raised. “The pixie treasure’s ours!”

Afterwards Harry shook his head, as Imoen quipped, “Well what you know, idiocy really can be deadly.”

From the bark of the tree in front of them a woman slowly stepped out onto the green around the tree’s roots, smiling at them. “I thank you adventurers,” she said in a deep, melodious tone.

The woman’s beauty made her earlier magical sending seem as pale a reflection as the magic which had created it. She was full-bodied, with wide, extremely well crafted hips and a chest that defied reason in both size and perkiness above a waist that was thin and almost but not quite toned. Her skin was the color of a ripe peach. Her hair was a perfect blonde cascading down her back in a wave. Set into a perfect, heart-shaped face, the dryad’s eyes were a bright, gleaming acorn brown, warm with both thanks and invitation.

She was in point of fact, the most perfect example of the phrase MILF that Imoen had ever seen and she said so aloud following this with a mutter of “Cock, she makes even Narcissa look ugly in comparison!”

“Who?” Harry asked out of the corner of his mouth, unwilling to turn his eyes away from the woman in front of him. He also idly red out the information his AA skill was giving from the woman and that he had passed some willpower check, as he had when fighting Silk.

Dryad Elder

Dryads are tree spirits. For reasons unknown, all Dryads are female. They are often considered forest guardians, and work with druids occasionally to safeguard their trees and the forest around them. They are gentle creatures not made for direct combat, but Dryads, like their water dwelling cousins the Sirens emit a never ending low-key Charm, and can use a full- powered version of the spell with no cooldown, as well as a few other plant-specific spells.

They are however vulnerable to such mental attacks, and are at times taken prisoner to be the slaves of rich men. Dryads taken like this rarely last long, but so long as the original tree survives the dryad can be reborn.

The Dryad Elder has extended her influence beyond a single tree, though her life and existence are still tied to that tree. She has great powers in her grove for life and rejuvenation, but none for death, which is anathema to her people.

Imoen didn’t reply to Harry’s question as the dryad continued to speak in that deep, velvety tone. “Those two were causing me more pain than I have felt in many a century, and their improbable immunity to my charms was most vexing. They were the first I have ever met that completely ignored my attempt to charm them. It was as if they did not understand I was real at all.”

“I suppose they had never heard of a dryad although that’s rather incredible in and of itself. Perhaps they were too obsessed with money to care?” Imoen replied, while Harry was trying not to be spellbound by the woman’s beauty. He had already noticed that Edwin, Garrick, and to a lesser extent even Minsc and Khalid were spellbound by her. But Harry wasn’t willing to let her charm him and tried to ignore the tiny message popping up in front of his eyes telling him about the continual effort that decision was taking.

“How can I ever repay you?” the woman said, her tone and body language telling her listeners exactly how she wanted to repay them, or at least the men among them. She looked at Imoen and Jaheira, one eyebrow rising, and Imoen flashed her a thumbs up, and a bright grin, while Jaheira simply rolled her eyes, grabbing her husband’s arm as he tried to move towards the dryad.

“This one is mine,” she said firmly. “The others are… she paused, blinking in surprise as she saw Harry looking away and closing his eyes, breathing deeply. “Harry, you are not charmed?” Jaheira asked looking at him quizzically after smacking her husband upside the head.

“I, um, you’re beyond beautiful lady dryad, but I prefer my mind to remain my own. And um, I’d really rather not lay with someone I’ve only just met, no matter their race.”

“Pity,” the woman said looking him up and down. “You look as if you have the most…potential of these men. But so be it. If you are strong-willed enough to overcome my beauty, than I will not try to force you to comply with my… desires.” She giggled wickedly as Harry shuddered from head to toe at the lilt she gave that word before looking over at Jaheira, addressing the druid as was her wont. “But I may have the others for the night? I promise I’ll give them back to you in as good a shape as they come to me.”

By this point, Edwin Garrick and Minsc had reached her, but a sudden bite on his ear from Boo broke Minsc out of it, and he shook his head. The bald Ranger backed away quickly, staring at the woman. “Although you are a most magnificently beauty, and Minsc would like to tumble with you in the hay as he did with several of the village girls back home, he is on a quest to find his Witch taken from him by most foul villiany and until that quest is done, there’ll be no time for fun fondling’s.

Harry blinked, as did the reviving Khalid, and they stared at the other man in shock. D, did you just s, s, say fun fondling’s?”

“That is possibly the most descriptive, and yet hilarious way to put it I’ve ever heard. Well done,” Harry said with a nod.

Minsc shrugged. “We Rasheman are known to be good with words as much as swords.” As he spoke he was still moving away from the dryad, and now stood next to Imoen.

“Great Mother,” Jaheira began again, “we did not save you just out of the goodness of our heart. We would have of course, such vile men as those two…”

“They needed killing,” Harry said with a nod. “I just hope that we were able to do so before they passed on their stupidity to the next generation.”

Jaheira chuckled at that, and even Khalid, who was still recovering somewhat from the impact of the Druids charm - and the slap upside the head – looked amused as the druid went on. “But we are on a quest to do something about the gnoll fortress to the west.”

“I know of it,” the dryad said, even as she reached out and tenderly stroked down Garrick’s cheek, causing the boy to almost swoon. Edwin on the other hand was now whispering into her ear, causing her to blush for the first time. She looked at him, smiled, and let one arm wrap around his waist before turning her attention back to Jaheira and the others. “I will send you on your way with as many healing fruits as I can give you, and you may rest here both on your journey to and back from the fortress.”

Harry nodded agreeably at that, and Jaheira asked “Great Mother, would you also be willing to charge my staff?”

She held it up and the Dryad’s eyes focused on it, before she nodded her head firmly. “Set it against my ancient oak, and it will be charged and more by tomorrow.” She smiled at the other woman. “Though I am sorry to say, but that is all the aid I can give you. If you are going to ask me to remove the curse on you and your husband, which I can sense now that I am looking for such, I could not do so.”

Jaheira shrugged. “It had had not even occurred to me that you could Great Mother. We have gone to dozens, perhaps a little under a hundred clerics, priests, and paladins. None of them have been able to discover how to break the curse.”

“What is its nature?” the dryad asked curiosity piqued at that.

“Vampiric my l, l, lady,” Khalid said, taking part in the conversation for the first time. Jaheira looked at him sharply, and he looked embarrassed, shrugging his shoulders. She sighed, and seemed to forgive him, looping one arm through his before turning back to the dryad.

“Vampire,” the dryad frowned then shook her head. “I’m sorry, there was something, something when I was young and newly formed when this land, what you call the Sword Coast was under the dominion of a vampire empire, and a religion arose to fight them. But I cannot remember more than that.”

The side quest (large) Free Your Companion of His Curse has been updated. You have found information which could lead you to the quest’s conclusion.

The Elder Dryad of Dryad Falls has given you some information about a religion built around facing a vampire threat. It follows that this religion, whatever it was, could perhaps hold the cure for the curse on your companion Khalid (and his wife). Trying to find out information about that religion should be your next step.

“…That could be enough of a clue,” Harry said obliquely, twitching his eyes towards Jaheira, who’s eyes widened as she realized what Harry was hinting at. She nodded firmly, thanking the dryad, who waved them away.

“The grove will guard you this night, bed down in it wherever you wish in safety and certainty of protection. The gnolls will never bother you here, nor will any other creature. Trust me, given the size of the gnoll patrols I have seen through my trees passing through nearby, you will need your rest to deal with them,” she finished before turning her attention on the two men around her, whispering into their ears as she led them around the tree to the opposite side.

“And if that wasn’t ominous I don’t know what is,” Harry quipped, moving away from the tree with Jaheira and Khalid.

Minsc and Imoen followed. “Come on Minsc, let’s see if we can find a place for us to bed down, then you can tell me more about Dynaheir. For all that we’ve been traveling for more a little under two days now, you actually haven’t told us much about her. Other than she is fair and a witch anyway.”

Harry chuckled moving in the same direction, looking over at Jaheira, cocking his head towards Imoen and the Ranger. “You two coming?”

Jaheira looked over at her husband. “I think not. We will see you in the morning, Harry.”

Shrugging his shoulders, left the married couple to what, judging from Khalid’s expression was going to be an argument, and followed after Minsc and Imoen. Story time before bedtime, with what was going to be their toughest battle yet on the morrow seemed like an excellent way to end a trying two days.

**End Chapter**