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**