

I am not a programmer nor British or Korean. Also, fuck the northern side of that peninsula. That is all.

This is the next chapter of Bhaalson Remodel. It has been edited by Justlovereadin' who had me rewrite a chunk of the chapter to be more clear about the prices of everything the group is buying at this point, and noticed several really embarrassing Dragon Naturally Speaking type errors I didn't pick up on.

Oh, a brief note for those who have played the original games. I made some changes to the bonuses from the Ankheg Plate Mail. Given the nature of those beasts, I think the changes make sense.

Gamer related color coordination for those who read the downloadable versions. Seriously, guys, it is a lot easier to flow all the Gamer stuff if you do that. Not having colors or even the ability to switch from all left to center really impacts how well this work can be read.

Green – party-related stuff

Orange – Quest related notifications.

Blue – NPC related notifications/observations.

Dark red – Enemy observations/bestiary notes.

Red – directly related to combat notifications

Purple – find out in the chapter.

Chapter 16: Blood on the Snow, Part 1

What was revealed as the last of the smoke dissipated was surreal to everyone there because where Edwin had stood before, there now stood a woman. Yes, she was still wearing Edwin's clothes, but the dichotomy from his previous body to this one was just too startling to realize they were one and the same at first.

At least for everyone who didn't have an Advanced Adventuring System in their head. For Harry, his vision of the raven-haired woman in Edwin's clothing was obscured by a new notification box popping up in front of his eyes. At first, it looked normal, but the normal Observation box seemed to shimmer and shift as if it couldn't quite follow what was going on for a second, something that the writing seemed to follow.

Name: Edwin Odesseiron

Gender: M@LERrooorr!**Femalwhaaa...

Edwin, The Red Wizard of Thay, has somehow been transformed into a woman!? Most decidedly a woman, one could almost see a perfect woman. She literally exudes Charm.

Warning: this will have an effect on those with weak minds.

This was quickly followed by a notification about Khalid.

Khalid has been **Infatuated** by Edwin's new body.

Due to past spell damage dealt to his Willpower and physical mind, as well as the **Curse of the Dread One**, Khalid is remarkably susceptible to mental attacks. Thus, Khalid has fallen into an **Infatuation** with Edwin's new body, the sight of it clouding his mind to reality almost as much as Garrick's was by Silk when you first met him.

...Khalid's current issue probably isn't helped by the fact that he quite enjoys looking at pretty human women in the first place.

Rather than actually reading through these two notifications as he normally would, Harry simply stared through them, his eyes flicking them to either side of his line of sight for a moment as he took in Edwin's new... form? Body? The illusion covering him? Harry wasn't certain just yet, although his AAS did seem to think that this was an actual gender change rather than some kind of spell that made him seem like a woman to their senses.

First of all, Edwin was shorter as a woman. This was normal, as most women were shorter than men, yet for some reason, where this should have meant that his (her?) clothing - pants, undershirt, wizard's robes and winter cloak - should be baggy on her, it only was in terms of her height. In the chest area, for instance, it was very much not, along with her hips, both areas standing out remarkably in his wizard's robe. Edwin now had hips almost like Dynaheir's, although up top, he wasn't quite as big as the Rashemani Witch.

He was a little bit bigger than Viconia, though, and nearby, Harry could see Viconia's eyebrow starting to twitch worryingly from where she was watching events. A hand on Alora's shoulder holding the Halfling back. "Stay back, girl. Whatever happened might be contagious."

Edwin's face was almost a perfect mix of haughty and warm, with high cheekbones coupled with a splash of color besides thin, disturbingly kissable lips. Edwin's black eyes had also been replaced by stunningly bright hazel eyes.

All in all, Harry had to agree with the advanced adventuring system. Not only was Edwin now a woman, but she was a stunningly beautiful one.

However, after a second, Harry, who actually wasn't under the effect of his body, simply stunned by events, slowly reached over and did the party a favor. This took the form of smacking Khalid upside the head before his wife, who had just left the group to use the facilities as it were (although using that term when it was simply a nearby hole dug out of the ground downwind was a bit much) could notice.

This seemed to work, as Harry instantly got a notification that Khalid was no longer Infatuated. Khalid stumbled a half-step forward and shook his head before turning away from Edwin for a moment, rubbing his eyes before turning back. "A, a, ah, she's still here. That's good, at l, l, least. I would have been much m, m, more disturbed if it was only me who saw such a v, v, vision..."

"Best keep that kind of thing to yourself, hmm?" Harry 'hinted' his elbow ready to poke the other man and a warning glare on his face. Since they had yet to put on their armor for the day, that was not a small threat.

By that point, the others had gotten over their own surprise. Dynaheir had begun to just full-on guffaw, her whole body shaking with mirth as she slowly stumbled backward. Beside her, Minsc sounded confused as he held up his miniature giant space hamster in front of him as if willing the little creature to make sense of what was going on. "What is this that Minsc and Boo see before them? A woman of surpassing prettiness stands in the place of our somewhat evil companion. What has happened?"

Imoen, meanwhile, decided to be a little more hands-on in answering that question. She reached over and poked Edwin lightly in the stomach and chest, which Edwin was also in the process of doing, hefting one of her breasts, then running a hand down her body, not even noticing the extra digit poking her other breast for a second. "What is, what is..."

Pulling out of Viconia's grip, Alora rushed forward, running her hands up from Edwin's thighs to her rear then around to her flat stomach. "Oh wow, you even still have a six-pack!? How is that even possible? Also, good grief, your rear is... ooh, if you're a woman now, we could go shopping together! The red doesn't do anything to bring out your eyes any longer. But really, what happened? This looks, ooh and feels amazing."

The word vomit from Alora and the two thieves both touching him finally broke Edwin out of her introspection. Her eyes widened, then one hand unceremoniously entered his robes near the top of her breaches. As Viconia began to snicker, and Imoen backed off with semi-wide eyes, Edwin reached inside her pants before gasping in horror. "It's gone! It's gone!"

A light giggle began to one side of Harry, and he turned in that direction only to stare at Jaheira, who was the one to giggle. He'd never heard that sound before, and he watched, his own smile widening in response as the half-elf giggled gaily, throwing her head back and

shaking her head from side to side, a wide beaming smile on her face as she stared at Edwin. “My my, I had always thought you were rather handsome, Edwin, but I must say **Edwina** blows that out of the water. You could give those sirine dancers in Lathander’s temple a true run for their money.”

Harry blinked as the initial notification that had popped up into his face, which he had mostly ignored, shifted a little, causing him to stare at it for a second. Then Khalid, having recovered from his own reaction to the strangely beautiful female Edwin, said something in Elvish to his wife. Jaheira responded in like kind, flicking her fingers towards Harry, then Minsc and then Edwin before making a strange motion, as if twining those two fingers together for a moment. At that, Khalid laughed, and Harry, guessing what that had been about, chuckled.

Viconia did not need to guess. While she was not fluent in High Elvish prior to coming to the surface, it did contain a certain amount of lingual connections to the drow language, and, frankly, body language like that was easy to read. “Truly, perfect men like that, who are both beautiful of face and perfectly muscular of body, do not exist, at least not in large numbers.”

“I think there was a shot across my boughs there, but I’m just going to silently shrug and move on,” Harry said with a snort.

The look Viconia gave him raked Harry’s body up and down as the blue-skinned woman smirked. Since they had been forced to camp out last night, the Color Change charm on her skin had faded out. “Do not worry, Harry. While your face is not as classically beautiful as Edwin’s, that does not mean it is not without its charm. The same can also be said for the rest of you.”

Harry flushed a little at that but smiled back at her before turning his head to look over at Edwin again, only for Jaheira to hold out a handful of grass, pulling it out of her Item Box. “By the way, you might wish to use this in your alchemical attempts.”

Blinking, Harry took the handful of grass from Jaheira, staring at it as a new page opened up in his botanical journal.

Fire Grass

A strange grass that has a hint of carnivorous action to it, this grass is quite rare and seemingly preys on other grass. Called Firestarter or Dry Grass, this grass can start a fire if the sunlight hits it just a little too hard and is normally treated as a pestilence anywhere near regular crops or buildings. You can tell it is a bit heavier than grass should be for some reason and touching it feels almost like you’re suddenly more energetic, your senses sharpening.

Fire can be used as an emergency stimulant, but using it in such a way has some sharp consequences. It can, even dried, be used to start fires of startling heat, but that is, surprisingly, not carried over into liquid form. At least not on its own

What kind of potions it is part of might tie into several potions, although perhaps ones that impact your senses rather than the explosive type.

Fire Grass can be used to replace pepper, although only in limited amounts. Eating more than that will deaden the palette. And cause dry heaving.

Beyond adding a peppery kick, it can taste like pine if still green. If dry, then it does really taste like a spoonful of pepper per blade of fire grass.

“Interesting. I wonder what kind of potions Fire Grass would make. I’m looking forward to trying to examine some of the potions we just bought. Thanks, Jaheira,” Harry said with a smile.

“Excellent. I will then keep an eye out for anything else I know has alchemical properties,” Jaheira nodded firmly, smiling at him in turn. “That could be an amazing addition to our arsenal.”

Harry was about to reply when Edwin finally spoke, drawing both of them back to her. “W, well, setting aside the loss of my magnificent wizard’s wand, this is oddly intriguing.”

Even her voice was feminine now, a light, furry kind of alto. It reminded Harry of a singer he had once heard give a small speech on TV when his aunt was watching her daytime dramas.

“Not only have I turned into a female, but I feel as if, and this might take some testing, that this body is in slightly better overall shape,” Edwin mused. “Despite the fact that I have what are admittedly quite nice breasts, my back is not, as I have heard some women complaining about, bothering me at present. Is this a timing issue, should I just wait however long it takes to appear? My skin is also indeed smoother, which is fascinating, although I could perhaps concede that is a normal change from man to woman.”

Imoen nodded at that. *When I used to morph from my normal female body to a man’s I always noticed my skin was rougher to the touch. And hairier, obviously.*

“But more importantly, from what I am detecting so far, my eyesight is a little better, and perhaps my hearing? Although, that would need further testing. Of course, that will have to wait until I am able to change back into my still-superior male body.”

Harry watched as Edwin reached for her belt, trying to undo the clasp holding it around her waist, only to fail. Edwin sighed then, shaking her head. “Of course. Cursed. I wonder, is this some kind of practical joke played on me by Thalantyr due to my being a Red Wizard? Or...”

Here, Harry interrupted. “My Advanced Adventuring System is telling me that it’s the belt itself. Whatever happened to you finally allowed it to name the item Edwin.”

Cursed Girdle of Sex Change.

Created by a wizard with a truly diabolical way of dealing with enemies and traitors alike, this belt is a uniquely magical item. It is able to give an extra 5th, 6th, and 7th level spell to the wearer and help them cast spells faster by cutting down casting speed by 25% percent.

However, that is not all, as you can see. When a man wears it, it changes the wearer into a woman. And not just a woman, but a **physically perfect** woman, as imagined by the person who created the belt. Physically perfect, in this case, means more than simply skin deep. The wearer's body becomes more proficient at practically any physical skill as hand-eye coordination, hearing, and reaction time all go up noticeably.

Whether or not this was then connected to some kind of loyalty spell is unknown, but it is very likely. Thankfully, if there was such an enchantment on the belt, it ended when the creator died. The residue from this spell is perhaps why it has taken so long and so many different eyes to analyze the belt.

As a side effect of this transfiguration, the wearer becomes Immune to any kind of offensive or defensive transfiguration or transformation spell.

After listening to this, Edwin looked torn between intrigue and anger. "While fascinating, I am uncertain if the change from being a magnificent example of manhood into an equally magnificent example of womanhood is worth the bother. I was already getting much of the positive enchantments of anyway..."

With that, Edwin began to strip off her robe, tossing it to one side, before reaching down and fighting with the belt in earnest. "Witch, I know you have a dispel spell. And Jaheira or Viconia, one of the two of you might also have a spell to get rid of curses?"

While Dynaheir indicated she did, still grinning at her fellow wizard's predicament, Jaheira and Viconia both shook their heads. They had Remove Fear, Remove Petrification, and Remove Stun and Charm, but nothing specific to curses in their clerical bag of tricks. "For that, you would need to go to a proper priest," Jaheira opined.

"Why does Minsc think that he should turn away from this?" Minsc asked, staring at Edwin as she began to fight with her belt buckle again, while nearby, Dynaheir began to weave her spell. The fact this process showed a lot of skin as her pants seemed poised to slip off and her shirt to burst, did not seem to register to the Red Wizard.

"Because there are places in the world where you would need to pay for a woman to strip off her clothing?" Alora asked jokingly while Harry just rolled his eyes.

"It's nothing dirty, Minsc. It just seems strangely off-putting given Edwin's current shape..." His voice trailed off as the belt around Edwin's waist was undone. This showed off her waist and a goodly bit of thigh, but Harry wasn't concentrating on that. Rather, what the belt had left behind.

Edwin held the physical belt in his hand, yet everyone there could still see a seemingly dark band of magic surrounding Edwin's waist, connected to the physical belt by a slim line of magicals energy. It was almost like it had left a shadow there, which connected the item to the woman in question. Then, as Dynaheir's spell ended, the physical belt disappeared from Edwin's hand, turning into little motes of magic. These motes zoomed back into position around her waist, the belt reforming perfectly where it had been as if nothing had happened.

"Well, that didn't work," Dynaheir said with a chuckle, watching as Edwin grumbled and pulled her breeches up further while pulling the belt away from her skin until the belt was once more holding her clothing in place. "Although, I think that a priest-type dispel might. It might cost us up to a thousand gold, but it would work."

As Dynaheir spoke, Harry got another notification from his Advanced Adventuring System, which he read aloud quickly. "Warning, the curse on this item is part and parcel of all of the enchantments upon it. If you break the curse, the object itself will shatter, the magic within no longer being in balance, destroying all the spells within and the physical body containing it."

"That is actually quite normal," Edwin said, nodding her head to Harry's words as she stared down at the belt around her waist. "Blast it all! Being able to cast three more spells per day is a tremendous boon for one such as I. I must carefully examine this further. I am unwilling, after so long, to simply leave this magic behind; it is too powerful a tool. There must be a way to simply remove the curse aspect. We were having luck with an Invoker-style dispel that tells me there is a way to do it without resorting to an overblown priestly intervention and thus refrain from losing the object."

"So, wait, you're willing to just stay as a woman then?" Harry asked, staring at Edwin in shock. "I think that would be a very bad deal."

"Oh, it undoubtedly is. If not for the fact that this is a supposedly physically perfect body, I would not be even considering it for a moment, not even for the amount of magical power this belt gives me. And yet, the upshot... it is impressive. Besides, I doubt it will take someone of my intelligence to figure out a way to safely remove the sex change aspect," Edwin announced proudly.

At that, Harry simply shook his head while Imoen asked if they would be better served to simply go back to Thalantyr.

Edwin instantly vetoed that idea. “No. Thalantyr the Conjurer is not the kind of resource one can go to more than once. Certainly not in my case, anyway, given his disdain for Thayans such as myself. Besides, he lied to me about this belt once already. Who is to say he would not do so again?” Edwin shook her head. “No, I will solve this issue. It should not take me for very long.”

Edwin then smirked, looking down at herself. “Besides, I am a connoisseur of the female form as well as a most puissant practitioner of the art arcane. Finding out what a woman can like from the inside out will only help me in future endeavors of seduction.”

The other girls weren’t certain what to think about that. On the one hand, that sounded sort of okay, but at the same time, it also very much did not. The men, along with Alora, who was badgering Edwin about going clothing shopping together again, decided that if Edwin was fine with that, they weren’t going to stop him. This was kind of hilarious, really, and Harry, in particular, was interested to see how he would react to how other people might react in turn to him/her.

“In that case, let’s finish cleaning up camp. Jaheira, Minsc, what kind of weather should we expect today?” Harry asked, changing the subject.

“Heavy rain with sleet,” Jaheira answered promptly.

As Harry stared at first her, then up into the air at the cold but clear sky, Minsc nodded, adding, “You must look to the west, friend Harry. Only there will you see evidence of what is to come. It will be much like an early winter’s day back home in my land, cold, bitterly chill, with rain enough to penetrate any coat, no matter how thick. Boo would recommend that we get a move on quickly, as would the mighty Minsc. Cold weather like that is enough to harm Boo despite my mighty body to protect him.”

At that, everyone hastened around, bar Edwin, who took a few steps, then overbalanced, scowling angrily down at herself. “All right, perhaps getting used to this body’s form will take me a little longer. It is certainly throwing off my sense of balance in a most annoying manner. And are these things always so sensitive against cloth?” She grumbled, lifting her chest with one hand under each breast, then pausing, hefting them a little for a few seconds and then shaking her head and moving on. “I must buy another silk shirt.”

“Ooh, that sounds like you agreed with me about going shopping~,” Alora teased with a grin. “Seriously, though, if any of us girls had any spare underwear, I’d share.” How exactly Alora would have someone like Viconia ‘share’ if she thought it was warranted was left unsaid as she crowded into Edwin’s personal space again. “But really, I have to wonder what else has changed. I mean, guys and girls don’t think in the same way, right, even girls and boys who like other girls and boys. And what would have happened to me if I put on that belt? Would I have become a

boy Halfling or a human woman? Because if that last's the case, woوو! That could be really interesting in a lot of ways.

"Or, hey, you could figure out that spell right while trying to get rid of it?" Imoen questioned, smirking suddenly. "Heh, I bet you could make a lot of money with that kind of transformation spell if you could use it on women."

Harry very carefully did not take note of that little bit of interaction, biting the inside of his lip to keep from either chuckling or simply staring as Imoen once more reached forward to poke Edwin's chest. *Or rather, Edwina's.*

With that thought and having finished cleaning his own portion of the camp, Harry moved over to Jaheira, speaking low so that only those with half elvish or elvish hearing could hear him, and even then, from only a short distance away. "I thought you'd find it funny, but your naming Edwin's new body actually changed his name in my AAS report. It's calling him Edwina now."

That caused Jaheira to laugh aloud, shaking her head while nearby Khalid and Viconia both chuckled a bit. "Excellent. In that case, I think it is only right and proper we all address 'her' like that," the blonde woman snickered.

Soon, the group was off, with its two regular scouts, Minsc and Jaheira, ahead of them, with Alora, Edwin and Dynaheir in the center and Harry and Viconia up in front. However, not two hours after they left the area where they had camped out the night before, Minsc and Jaheira were back, coming towards them, not because of any danger that showed up on Harry's map.

Minsc canceled his Hide-in-Shadows technique as he moved towards Harry, shaking his head and pointing to the left of their current path. "A mudslide of some kind has taken out of a portion of the trail. We will have to go south, further away from the hills here, to come at Beregost from further south than we left it. The trail is no longer our friend."

"How far out of our way is that going to take us, though?" Harry asked worriedly, staring up at the sky. With most of the leaves falling, that was a lot easier at the moment than it would have been, but the view wasn't any better for that any longer. The nice, if cold, sunny autumn day had been replaced by an overcast sky, with still more, and far worse, clouds piling in from the west. "Those clouds look nasty now. You were right, Minsc."

The new clouds coming in on the heels of the others did look quite nasty, the entire party agreed, even the normally happy-go-lucky Alora joining with those who had actually been to the coastal area of the sword coast in looking up in trepidation. The Sword Coast wasn't known by that moniker just because most of the coast was lined with jagged ship-shattering

rocks but also because of the horrendous storms that ravaged the coastline on a nearly daily basis.

The sky currently looked like one of those storms had lost its way and ventured inland, ready to make anyone outside miserable.

“Given how wide and far the mudslide has gone, we’d have to go out of our way for several hours, but the mud is quite deep and has washed out a large portion of the trail,” Jaheira warned. “Going forward would be quite treacherous.”

Harry looked over at Imoen quizzically, who nodded firmly. “I bet I can think of something with our Blood Magic spells. Let’s push on. I think the faster we get back to Beregost and undercover, the better. Heating cantrips can only do so much.”

Edwina and Dynaheir looked intrigued, and the group pushed on, coming to where the mudslide began in a little under twenty minutes as Harry hadn’t stopped the main group’s forward progress when he noticed the two scouts coming back their way. And true to what Minsc and Jaheira had said, the path back to Beregost disappeared into what looked like a quagmire. There was mud as far as any of them could see from one side to another and as far as they could see through the trees with rocks and the forest’s trees sticking out in numerous places.

It wasn’t a mudslide as Harry had pictured in his mind, as there was a good deal less watery, mobile-type mud involved. It seemed instead that the ground had been turned into thick, dark black mud. Yet when Imoen stepped forward into it, her foot nearly sank down beyond the top of her boot and Harry instantly understood why Jaheira and Minsc thought that they needed to go around. “I wonder where this all came from?”

“There’s a few small rivers underneath there. They flooded out sometime in the night, spreading throughout the area,” Jaheira explained, gesturing to their left towards the small hills they had been moving around when they headed out to the High Hedge.

After Imoen was helped back out of the mud, she shook out her foot, using a cleaning charm on it, a charm that Harry had learned in his first year at Hogwarts. Amusingly enough, it only took two HP out of her health pool. Now clean, Imoen stared at the mud, then asked Dynaheir if a Cone of Cold would be able to freeze the ground.

Dynaheir blinked at that, then nodded and admitted that she even had such a spell. Between them, she and Imoen figured out to shape a Blood Magic spell (Glacis from back in their old world) that allowed Imoen and Harry to freeze the ground ahead of them. This made it so that when they stepped onto the mud, they were no longer sinking into it, although it did crunch and give under their feet a bit. Because of this the mud was still a bit hard to get across,

yet they still saved a lot of time than they would've lost going around this area and linking up to the great South Road, as they would've had otherwise.

However, as the group finished getting across the largest segment of mud coming down off of the hills, Harry blinked as he saw several small red dots on his map. "It looks like we have trouble up ahead. Jaheira, you're nearly across. Head out and figure out what it is. Sorry, Alora, but your Hide In Shadows skill just isn't good enough in woods like these that I want you to come close to actual enemies."

"Oh, come on!" Alora grumbled. "Then you just want me to wait here for the rest of you? But that's so boring!"

Alora had made it across the mud incredibly quickly, her short stature and light weight allowing her to practically race across the frozen ground despite the footing. Similarly, Jaheira, Viconia and Khalid were having a much easier time of it than the humans, being more naturally dexterous than them and also lighter in the main. Well, after Khalid had stowed his full plate mail anyway. Their footing was simply better.

"Never fear, Alora. Minsc and I can teach you how to move silently in the woods quickly enough," Jaheira answered before gesturing up a treat near the outskirts of the mud zone. "Until then, though, you could climb one of these trees and provide some scouting from up there. Remember that Harry's map cannot sense anyone hiding using magic or Hide-in-Shadows."

That perked the young Halfling up quickly, and somewhat amusingly also caused her and Harry to see a quest pop up, one that made Harry smile. "Ho, this looks familiar. Alora just got the same quest you did when Jaheira 'volunteered' to teach you how to move more silently in the woods, Imoen.

The quest, which Harry read aloud, read as:

Alora has accepted the personal quest, Get Sneaky Scrub.

As a city girl, while she is about as sneaky with her hands as any Halfling could be, Alora isn't used to worrying so much about what kind of noise her feet can make in a forest, with branches, leaves and so forth. As such, her Hide-in-Shadows skill suffers a -20% penalty to both the length of time the skill can be activated, and the chance of it failing.

Luckily, Jaheira has offered to train her. For every week Alora practices with Jaheira, the penalty she is acting under drops by 5%. Further, if she keeps training after that, she can add to her existing Hide-in-Shadows skill by 10%.

“Huh, yep. Other than the name being different, that’s pretty much the same quest I got back then, although the reward was different for me. Neat,” Imoen quipped from where she was standing on a boulder sticking out of the frozen mud. “So what do you say, my sister in sneakery, you up for it?”

“Just try and stop me,” Alora giggled, before turning away, wrapping her arms around a tree and trying to hoist herself up.

The rest of the group was almost entirely out of the area covered by the mudslide and onto the other side of the trail by the time Jaheira returned.

“Xvarts,” she reported crisply, shaking her head. “A goodly number of them. They seem to be traveling on a northern approach, paralleling the road. Where they might be heading, I don’t know, although perhaps the Fisherman’s Lake.”

“Goodly number, huh? I’d assumed with those little bloggers, what, twenty, thirty?” Harry guessed. He had not been impressed by the xvarts in the small village-like spawning point the group, then smaller than it was now, had wiped out prior to heading into the Halfling fortress dungeon.

“Exactly so. Twenty-two, to be precise. Counting them was quite annoying,” Jaheira grumbled, shaking her head. “They are all constantly moving, shifting around one another as they travel through the forest.”

Harry thought for a moment, trying to imagine in his mind where they were currently. If the xvarts were paralleling the road, staying well away from Beregost proper, then maybe they were indeed heading towards the same lake where Harry had collected so many gnoll ears after the meeting with Drizzt D’Orden. “I suppose we should take them out if they intend to camp around the lake and ambush anyone going that way. Especially if some of us mean to make use of the lake ourselves.”

“I wonder if we’ll get some kind of bonus towards our progress in getting the wisdom point from it if we go fishing during the winter. If normal fishing is supposed to be so good for building wisdom normally, then surely needing to ice fish would be even better, right?” Imoen wondered aloud. She was one of the ones who wanted to raise her Wisdom. She had eleven wisdom at this point, having started with eight. In fact, after having learned that the Curse of the Dread One stopped Jaheira and Khalid from gaining any stat points,

Rolling his eyes, Harry decided to push the subject back onto the xvarts, noticing that Khalid and Minsc both looked interested, while Edwina looked somewhat amused. “Getting back onto the xvarts, do you think you could find a spot for yourself, Alora, and Minsc to set up on the other side without alerting them?”

“Hey! I know my Hide-in-Shadows skill isn’t all that good out here in the woods because, well, there are so many leaves and I am a city girl and all that, but I still can use it! Getting into position is not going to be a problem,” Alora grumbled, forgetting how, after getting bored of her attempts to climb a tree that didn’t have enough branches, she’d been trying to use Hide-in-Shadows, only for the technique to fail every few minutes.

“I will go with them,” Imoen volunteered. “Viconia and Jaheira have a lot of healing spells stored up, and that means we’re free to play a bit.”

Harry nodded, realizing he hadn’t really taken that into account in his planning for a moment. *Too used to wanting to conserve my health I suppose. But it isn’t like we’re going to let any of the xvarts get away, and speed is kind of of the essence right now.* “Alright, we’ll do it that way. Khalid, me, Viconia, Edwina and Dynaheir will come in looking fat and lazy to draw the xvarts down on us. When the attack comes, we’ll counterattack, and then you sweep in from behind. Don’t sweep until after we’ve already begun to turn the tables on them.”

If there weren’t so many, I’d say we could just march right into bow range and attack. But Xvarts aren’t stupid enough to stay and fight if they start losing members of their horde left and right. And I don’t want any of them to escape. Even if they retreat somewhere else for the winter, it’s all too likely they’ll come back with friends in the spring. I’d rather nip the problem in the bud now.

“I doubt we need any grand strategy or tactic beyond what has already been outlined,” Edwina drawled, her words following Harry’s thoughts if from a different frame of mind than Harry. “These are xuart. They’re not exactly known for their courage. Breaking them and then bringing them all down will be easy so long as we allow them to close with us enough so they cannot then retreat out of spell range.”

Her eyes then narrowed, and she pointed an angry finger at Harry even as the group of flankers headed off through the woods, Hide-in-Shadows and Forest Meld turning them invisible to the naked eye but still visible to Harry and the rest of the party. “By the way, what is with this ‘Edwina’ term? You’ve given me a new name in this form? Whatever for?”

That somewhat amusing conversation took them up until the time of the xvarts sprang their ambush. But as anyone with an ounce of military sense could have told the little blue-skinned goblin-like creatures, an ambush on an enemy prepared for it could be turned against the attackers all too quickly.

“Remember to wait until the first group at least is within sword range, you two,” Harry reminded the two magic users then turned back towards the xvarts. “Then you can start using spells,

Harry and Khalid's shields came up, blocking the first few arrows headed in their direction, while Dynaheir and Edwina launched slingstones. The xvarts ignored the stones that knocked two of them off their feet, rushing forward. Thankfully, the xvarts charged at them from along a narrow front, only starting to spread out as they charged due to the number of trees around them.

As the first few charged into range of their short swords, Harry cut one down, and then Dynaheir and Edwina began to chant. Edwina finished noticeably faster than Dynaheir, showing the speed bonus her female body gave her. This caused a sort of staccato effect as they hit, one to the left and the right of the spreading out group of xvart.

Dynaheir and Edwina began to pull back while Viconia charged to one side, heading towards the few xvarts that were still trying to come up at them from that side as Harry did the same on the other. Khalid charged forward directly at the center of the horde of xvart, which was very much not a horde any longer as the xvarts in the radius of the two fireballs shrieked and died.

Those around those areas began to fall back. Seeing that, Khalid paused, pulling out his bow. Quickly fitting an arrow to the string, he fired twice in succession, and from this close, Khalid couldn't miss even if he wanted to. The first shot skewered one of the short monsters through the neck, while the second took another target in the head, respectively. Khalid's arrow was powerful enough to punch straight through the bones of the xvarts.

As the xvarts recoiled across the front, Jaheira led the rest of the group in on the attack. Slingstones and arrows were more than enough against xvarts, and three more of them fell to the precise fire. The next moment, Imoen became involved, launching a fireball into the center of the largest group of xvarts remaining. Harry barely even noticed the popup warning him that Imoen had lost five health, as this was swiftly followed by two more spells from Dynaheir and Edwina, a poisonous Smog spell, and his newest spell, the Skull Trap.

This spell conjured into being a large, almost giant-sized skull around the size of a normal man's torso, which hovered in midair at the center of where the caster had specified it should appear. It then instantly exploded, sending bits of bone shard everywhere, far more bits than a normal skull would contain, showing that the empty skull was filled with more bits of bone.

Most of the xvarts had begun to turn tail from the moment the ambush had been turned on them. Now, all of them were trying to, their dots on Harry's map shifting to yellow with the suddenness of an axe blow. Yet Harry and the rest of his party were relentless. Even as rain began to fall, they finished off the small, weak monsters.

Staring up at the sky as Dynaheir's hurled slingstone killed the last Xvart as it tried to escape, Harry shook his head, chill raindrops splashing on his face. "I think that is our cue to push on, ladies and gentlemen. Let's move."

Jaheira nodded, taking up position at the front with Harry for a moment. "By the way, I found something else you might be able to use in your alchemical experiments. Remind me to drop it off in the kitchen later."

Harry nodded distractedly and got the group moving along the trail again, not even bothering to do any harvesting. Experience told him there was very little to gain from a xvart's corpses as very few of them even had pouches to hold important things. And frankly, it would simply take too long to go from body to body to make certain of that. Plus, there was no bounty on xvart ears or anything, so Harry's Complex Item Box would be useless.

This proved to be an excellent move because within ten minutes, the rain began to really pound down on them, accompanied soon by sleet. Luckily, Harry had not sent Minsc and Jaheira ahead of the group again, and they were all together as they continued back towards waiting civilization.

Harry and Imoen began to use heating spells on all of the non-wizards, which helped immensely as the chill of the sleet began to penetrate even the prepared winter clothing that Harry had insisted they all buy. Dynaheir and Edwina were able to use their own spells to keep themselves warm via their robes. Thanks to Viconia and Jaheira, neither of the Blood Magic users had to deal with any drain on their health for very long, but visibility was still incredibly poor. Even Elvish eyesight could be blocked by conditions such as this, although it was still somewhat better than a normal human's.

Because of this, Harry had Viconia take a position behind the group. Jaheira and Khalid were positioned to either side of their current course by a few feet. This created a loose, small triangle in which they were all visible to one another as they moved forward.

It was pushing past midday by the time Khalid saw the first signs of civilization ahead of them, the first of a few of the outermost farms of Beregost. At that, Edwina voiced a complaint. "Surely we can inveigle upon some farmer to allow us to remain within his hovel until this passes over? If not pay the man, then threaten him! I am getting soaked in places that until this morning I did not have!"

While both magic users' robes could contain additional spells for comfort, there was still a limit as to what they could do about so much rain coming down on top of them.

Harry looked over at Imoen. With the amount of sleet and rain coming down, even hearing was hard, and with all of the half-elves out a few yards away from the rest of the group,

the two of them could actually talk without being overheard. "Are you positive there's no spell from back in our old dimension that would keep off the rain?"

"There are a few that would keep off the rain, but none that would work on more solid stuff like sleet as well, and most of them are kind of intensive in terms of magical energy," Imoen answered with a shrug. Then she shouted, "I think I'd rather not set us back on the whole quest that Harry had to take on for us all to earn back the trust and respect of the townsfolk, you know? With the whole threatening one of the farmers, I mean. And I don't know about you, but I sure as heck don't want to be stuck in Beregost after winter's over."

Edwina grumbled a bit at that but couldn't exactly argue. Thankfully, though, after they passed the first house, the trail became a lot easier to follow, and the group came back together, following the normally hard-packed dirt roads through the various farms. At the moment, it was muddy and nasty, but they could still move along it. The weather was so bad that there was no one else around, and once they were in the town proper, Harry instantly ordered everyone else to head over to the house. With access to the map, he could find his way around the town easily even in this weather and felt that everyone deserved to get inside quick.

Even Harry spent only a few moments telling Officer Vai about the xvarts they'd run into and how they had solved the chicken issue.

Vai looked a little amused at Harry's current bedraggled appearance, shaking her head. "Good to know that you at least were able to get Mellicamp back to his master. And now he's out of our hair. As for any further work we'll have for your group going forward over the next few days, there won't be all that much. Perhaps you and that big fellow Minsc, is it? Perhaps the two of you can help some of the farmers as they come into town for the winter, but that's pretty much it for now."

She looked down at her desk for a moment before clicking her fingers and pulling out a piece of paper. "Well, other than this. A trapper came in from the northwest this morning. He passed on a story to us before he started to sell his wares in the market."

Once again picturing the overall geography of the sword coast, Harry slowly nodded. "That would be in the direction of Candlekeep, right? A straight line towards it, I mean."

"Through quite a lot of treacherous terrain, full of monsters and natural traps for the unwary, sure. As well as the work of more than a week even in the best of conditions," Vai said dryly. "No, he was actually ranging out towards the coastline, in an area past the High Hedge. Apparently, he discovered a group of men on the move. A small group, around three or so. With food and supplies, but no real woodcraft he said. The group was apparently heading even further northwest than he was, coming up from the south."

"All right, but what business is that of the town or of me?"

"The trapper got close enough to one of the men to it may or may not be the one to the bounty, Brage, my former counterpart down in Nashkel who apparently went insane," Vai answered, a grimace on her face. As if the idea was causing her pain. "If he comes back this way, it will fall to you and your group to deal with him."

The small Side Quest: Find the missing Captain Psycho, has been updated.

The former captain of the Nashkel guard, Brage apparently has met up with other men and has been coming north ever since. You might be called upon by Vai to deal with him if he is spotted near Beregost.

Reward: 500XP.

Warning: Due to being updated by information given to you by Vai, this quest now falls under the Side Quest (Medium) An Oath Fulfilled, and thus will not offer any monetary compensation.

"But he's not liable to show up anytime soon?" Harry questioned, reading the popup quickly but not really caring about it right now. When Vai nodded, he turned away. "In that case, if you'll excuse me, I hear a good fire and some warm soup calling my name."

Vai snorted, gesturing to a brazier behind her, which kept her office nice and warm and which was set next to a doorway leading into what looked like a bedroom. "Get out of here. But you'd best get used to the cold, as not going to go away for the next few months."

Harry allowed the woman to have the final word, simply nodding his head and heading back out the door, making his way through town. By the time he had arrived in the house, the girls were mainly done with their warm baths, although Jaheira, the fastest to finish, reported a certain issue that honestly Harry should have seen coming. "None of the girls are willing to allow Edwina to join us during our bath times, so we have decided that most days, we will simply send her to one of the inns to have a bath there. On days like this, however, she was forced to wait for a bit."

"Did you actually argue with that?" Harry asked, looking over at Edwina incredulously. "Come on, you had to have known..."

"I was not attempting to take advantage of them or anything of that nature if that is what you mean to imply with your rather asinine comment," Edwina retorted. "I was simply so tired and wet and exhausted from slogging through the mud that I just followed up the, ugh, other women when they headed up the stairs. I didn't realize what we were doing until after we had all begun to disrobe. At which point, it certainly did not make any sense for me to put my wet clothing back on!"

“Luckily, some more heating charm and a drying charm settled the argument. It isn’t nearly as nice as a warm bath, but it should sustain Edwina until it’s her turn,” Jaheira chuckled.

Harry nodded wearily at that. Soon, he, Khalid and Minsc headed up the stairs to take their own baths as the girls came down. By the time Edwina was done with hers, Harry had time to whip up something for the group. Warm, heavy onion soup hit the spot after a day like this, and afterward, everyone retired quickly, most of them too tired to want to spend any more time awake than necessary.

However, the next morning, everyone was roused out of their beds in a most obnoxious manner. Instead of being roused from sleep by the message from Harry’s AAS as normal, a scent from the kitchen hit them one after another.

Minsc was the first to notice. He, Harry and Edwin slept on the first floor, while the unattached girls slept in the master bedroom on the second floor, and the married couple took one of the smaller bedrooms. Now, Edwina slept in the hallway on the second floor while Alora joined Imoen, Viconia and Dynaheir. That had caused some discussion, but in the interest of keeping involuntary morning glimpses to a minimum, as Edwina’s silk shirt and sleep pants showed quite a bit of cleavage and was in danger of falling off her, it had been decided to put her up on the second floor.

Now, as a stench like a series of skunks releasing their musk in a midden hit him, Minsc gagged, rousing himself long enough to make certain that it wasn’t coming from Boo before pulling his blanket over his nose as the little creature buried his head into the crook of Minsc’s neck, trying to ignore the smell and unwilling to rouse himself further.

Those above, however, did not have Minsc’s near-inhuman willingness to ignore such smells.

“Oh my God! What is that smell!?” Dynaheir moaned, covering her nose and burying her head into her pillow as the scent came through the closed door to the master bedroom.

Jaheira and Khalid, who were sharing a bed, and Viconia, who was sharing a room with Dynaheir, Alora and Imoen, did likewise. None of them were willing to get up and try to get to the bottom of whatever was going on, as that would force them to pull their heads out of the pillows that were currently keeping them sane under the smell’s onslaught.

Imoen, however, could not. She had a better sense of smell than the others, and her eyes watered even through her pillow. Gagging, she turned over, grabbing her nose with both hands as she fell out of bed, having won the nightly rock paper scissors match to decide who got the bed the night before. Struggling to her feet, she groaned. “Fuck me, that smells like

someone set off a dung bomb in the girls' dorms again!" she grumbled before noticing that the portion of the floor where Alora had been the night before was vacant. *Huh?*

The next moment, she headed outside and paused, seeing Edwina on the floor of the hallway. One hand was over her nose, the sheets covering her all tossed about. "Make it stop! By all that is unholy, holy and in between, take that smell away!"

For a second, Imoen's anger at whatever was causing the smell faltered as she took in the sight of Edwina's perfectly proportioned body again, only with far less between that body and Imoen's inquisitive eyes for a second. *Damn! Her tits look perfect. That old enchanter or whoever made the belt of gender change must've been one interesting guy.*

More importantly, Edwina wasn't alone. Alora was sleeping at her feet. *Okay, so they're both girls, but why do I think that Alora'd be okay with it even if Edwina was still Edwin and she snuck down to sleep with him and the other boys? Not that I think they like one another in that way; it's just Alora doesn't seem to have much feminine-type modesty, and if last night is any indication, she falls asleep normally still chattering away. Best to stop that kind of thing now.*

Resolutely, Imoen moved over, pulling the extra shirt Alora had been using to cover her face. The little Halfling looked over it at the taller (although not by much) human girl. "Oh my stars and flowers, what in the heck is that smell Imoen!?"

"Come on," Imoen muttered, using a Bubblehead charm on the girl, grunting a bit at the hit to her health. "Let's go see what Harry's up to."

"Ehh? You think he's the one who created this whatever it is?" Alora breathed in deeply, happy to no longer smell anything. "And this spell is so cool! We have to go swimming with this when it's warm out."

"Heh, sure. And who else could be behind it? It's not like someone killed a troll in here and left it to rot after all," Tonks answered. "Plus, this woke us up rather than the normal eight-hour message thing, which means he somehow woke up earlier than the rest of us." *Did he find out some way to set an alarm or something?* "Now come on. We're also going to be talking about your sleeping in here with Edwina. It might seem fine on the surface but..."

Imoen's prediction on that score was quite accurate. Harry was indeed the instigator of the smell disaster. He had indeed found a way, after poking at his Stat pages, found a way to set an alarm for himself. This allowed him to let the others sleep in while also waking himself up in seven hours rather than the previous eight.

He wouldn't use the system when they were in the wild, though. Canceling the eight-hour 'normal' notification cut out the alarm that woke the party up if there were enemies about.

Harry had thought ahead and used a Bubbleheaded Charm on himself, which did well enough to keep the smells away as it had during Potions class back in his old world, and then began experimenting. Early in the morning seemed the best time to try to use his Master Chef skill to make the jump to alchemy.

Unfortunately, his first attempt at reverse engineering a Potion of Explosion had failed.

Harry had poured just a little bit out of the container into a small iron cup, examining it closely, smelling it, and then, eventually, tasting it. His Master Chef ability had been able to tell him a few things about it: that it was composed of only a few different ingredients for one thing. Three were chopped and then stewed into the mix until they dissolved. The liquid that acted as a base was not simple oil, but some kind of heavily distilled substance.

Without information on what those ingredients could be, Harry had begun to try and see if he could create the same effects with some of the alchemical ingredients they'd picked up, especially the Fire Grass since that made some sense to him. Unfortunately, this didn't work so well.

Potion of Smell and Smoke.

Your first effort into the world of alchemy has not been a complete failure. Thanks to your MasterChef skill you were actually able to craft something. Well done. It's just not something all that useful.

This Potion of Smell and Smoke creates an equivalent of several dung bombs from the Weasley twins going off all at once in the face of anyone who is unlucky enough to be in the vicinity, while creating a kind of smoke that can sting anyone's eyes. The smell will go further, but the smoke is more debilitating.

While that could potentially be useful, the potency of this potion is incredibly bad. This potion will only work for an hour or so after being brewed, and loses its potency almost instantly afterward, making storing it impossible.

And no, even your Complex Item Box won't stop an alchemical mistake like this from going bad. They are mutually exclusive things. After it loses its potency to create smoke, it will simply become even smellier while turning into a kind of tar-like substance, impossible to remove from its container.

This is a failure, and as such, no recipe has been created in your Recipe Book.

"Interesting," Harry mused, right before a hand smacked him upside the head while another one grabbed him by the hip and twisted him around to where he could find himself

staring down and then further down at the faces of Imoen and Alora, who were both glaring angrily at him.

They were joined moments later by Dynaheir and Viconia. The two women had finally had enough and pushed out of bed, followed by Khalid, all of whom stopped and stared at Minsc, where he was still sleeping, a pillow over his head. "Oh my God, it's worse down here! How is..."

Khalid ignored the other's reaction, racing down the steps to shake Minsc. "M, m, Minsc, Minsc, are you alive? Talk to m, m, me, Ranger!?"

Eventually, Bubblehead Charms spread throughout the group and were able to allow everyone to deal with the smell enough to at least get out of the house, opening up the windows and clearing it out. If it was spring or summer, this act would probably have undoubtedly had the neighbors on all sides of them grabbing up whatever weapons they had to hand and expressing their displeasure in no uncertain terms to the adventurers who had somehow brought in the smell of a leatherworker's factory into the heart of their community. But thankfully, with winter just around the corner, few people were out this morning, and those that were were busily moving well away from the adventurers' house.

In a sign of utter and complete irony, as they vacated the premises Harry received an update.

Your stinking mistake has caused a dip in the reputation of your party with the locals.

It isn't that large a dip, but you would best be more aware of your surroundings in the future.

Needless to say the need to leave the smell to dissipate naturally forced the group to adjourn to one of the Indians, which offered breakfast. Everyone who had tasted Harry's meals thought it was somewhat subpar, which only added to the annoyance everyone felt towards him now, a fact that the glares sent his way made certain Harry understood.

"All right, um..." Harry began before Imoen's small fist smacked into his side.

"We will all get you back for this morning, Harry. Finding out you could turn off that annoying eight-hour message was fine. But that smell..." Jaheira growled, everyone else at the table nodding bar Minsc, who was too busy eating to join in.

"I'm sorry, alright? I didn't think that Fire Grass would create such a noxious smell. I was using the Bubblehead Charm in case the fumes were dangerous. I didn't even notice the smell until Imoen popped my bubble," Harry explained, not for the first time. *At which point I nearly threw up. Damn, that stuff was nasty.*

"All in favor of Harry being forced to air out the house and clean up after his mess, raise your hand?" Imoen asked. Everyone there, even Alora, who felt a little sorry for Harry, did so.

"I was already planning to do that very thing," Harry quipped, shaking his head, before changing the subject. "Anyway, Vai told me about a possible bounty moving towards the town last night when I checked in with her. Beyond that, she only has some minor things for us to do today. While I deal with the mistake in the kitchen, I suggest that Minsc, you work Viconia through some exercises. Jaheira, you expressed interest in getting Alora more used to moving silently through the forest, right?"

Alora grinned eagerly as Jaheira nodded, and Harry turned to look over at Edwina, who was still being looked at by a few of the other locals despite all of them sitting down now. All of the girls drew gazes occasionally, even Alora, but for some reason, Edwina's appearance drew more than the normal number of eyes.

Concentrating on one of the locals looking in Edwina's direction, Harry realized he had become Infatuated just like Khalid had the morning before. "Edwina, would you mind going with them? Just in case they run into something and need some wizardly firepower."

"I suppose if I must lend my aid, then doing so against actual opponents rather than in simply aiding the local townsfolk and whatever tiny, insignificant troubles mar their tiny, inconsequential lives would be fine." That was a bit harsher than even Edwina would normally be, although the glare over her shoulder at the group of men looking at her from behind the booth they were all sitting in perhaps pointed to a reason.

Jaheira snorted. "And now you are starting to understand there are far more downsides than just messing with your balance when it comes to suddenly having a female form. Congratulations."

Dynaheir smiled vindictively. "I think that Edwina should stay in that form for at least a full turn of the moon. What do you think, ladies?"

All of the girls evolved into laughter at that, even Alora laughing at her friend's expense. Harry, Khalid and Minsc, who astonishingly knew what they were talking about, all looked at one another, then shook their heads as Edwina suddenly understood, her face going even paler than normal.

"All right, getting back on topic. Imoen, Dynaheir, it'll be your turn to head over to Vai and see what small jobs they want done around the place. I think we should all spend the morning on our various projects and meet back at the house for lunch. After that, we'll head over to Thunderhammer's."

“Are you sure you wish us to continue to ‘retool’ as you put it? We could wait until after our primary reason for staying within the town is finished,” Jaheira opined, hinting at the quest to regain the trust and respect of the locals that Harry had been given.

“I figure we can make that deliberation once Thunderhammer tells us if he’ll take the promissory note. If he doesn’t, we’ll wait, but I think between that, the jewels and the remnants from the Ankheg chitin, we should be good.”

The retooling process had begun back at Thalantyr’s. Acid arrows, ice fire and electricity slingstones for the slingers, and the Skull Trap and Spook spells along with healing potions/ The frontline fighters got two each, and everyone else received one.

Between all that, they were down to the emeralds they had discovered after their battle with Bassilus and his horde, the loan Stone from the same battle, the ten thousand gold promissory note from the Harper’s, and around eight hundred in actual gold. But the ankheg chitin they’d brought back would pay for the armors from the same, and the rest would be set towards anything else they bought at thunder hammers.

The near-run in with the two adamantine golems that protected Thalantyr the Conjurer had told Harry that there were a lot of threats out there that they might need to be better armed and armored for. They wouldn’t be able to find weapons, but better armor for Harry and the others would go a long way to hopefully keeping them alive going forward.

Everyone agreed with that, even Jaheira after a moment’s thought, and she nodded when Harry appointed her in charge of the group going into the woods. Edwina grumbled a little at that, but considering what they were going out there to do, it made more sense for the druid to be in charge.

Soon after, the group broke up, with Harry heading back to the house on his own. He was almost out of the door before he heard a loud slap from behind him and Edwina shouting, “Do not touch me fool!”

Harry did not turn around, simply shaking his head and continuing on his way. He had a very smell, nasty mess to clean up. Someone else could deal with the fallout of that.

OOOOOOO

It was with some amount of trepidation that Viconia and her temporary trainer became the first to head back to the house for lunch. They paused outside the door, looking at one another for a moment.

Most of the time, Viconia didn’t really have much to do with Minsc. She approved of his loyalty to Dynaheir as the Witch’s bodyguard and to Harry as the party leader, but she had to

fight back a little bit of cringe every time he made some statement along the lines of his favorite 'butt-kicking for goodness'... and she had found Boo sleeping in one of her discarded bras at one point.

Similarly, Minsc, despite having volunteered to help the pretty dark-skinned elf lady build up her muscles to the point where they would be worthy of an adventurer, had some trouble reconciling the fact that she was a drow, a normally evil race. And some of her comments also rubbed him the wrong way. Particularly the desire Viconia had voiced about wanting to boil Boo alive at one point.

Right now, however, they were united in their trepidation of what might be awaiting them in the house. "Surely five hours is enough time for Harry to have cleaned," Viconia murmured, making no move to reach for the door handle.

"We did not smell anything as we walked up to the door, and the windows are all closed now. Perhaps Harry really was able to clean everything. Minsc certainly hopes so, as that smell was even more penetrating than the time the entire lodge had eaten some bad meat, and far too many of us could not get outside in time."

"Too much information," Viconia answered flatly, finally stealing herself to open the door. A moment later, what hit their noses was not the horrifying smell they had feared but a smell of some kind of meat cooking on the bone wafting out of the kitchen. Oddly, there were also sandwiches, simple fare set out on the table ready to eat.

Moving inside, Minsc headed towards the sandwiches, tapping his stomach and shouting about how a "Warrior as mighty as he needed his energy" while Viconia made her way into the kitchen.

For a moment, she stopped at the doorway, watching Harry move around, working on several different things, before she shook her head. Moving up behind him, Viconia slowly wrapped her arms around his waist, feeling him jump at the contact as she began to work her hands up and down his front, feeling the powerful muscles there twitching under her touch. "You need to work on your situational awareness," she said tartly, trying to pinch his skin lightly. "You should've seen Minsc and I coming on your map, Abalolth. Being distracted like that could be deadly."

"I was busy. I made a few discoveries." Harry said with a wan twist of the lips. Indeed, Viconia noticed that he was moving slowly, almost as if he were injured. Yet he did not have any visible injury despite his skin being a little too chalky white for her tastes.

Her eyes narrowed, Viconia took a step back, then used a Heal Medium Wounds.

At that, Harry's fatigue seemed to disappear, and his shoulders straightened as he smiled at her again. "Thanks for that. I used some Blood Magic spells to get rid of all the vapors and the smell. The smell seemed to cling to everything it touched. None of the spells took a lot out of me individually, but since most of them didn't have a near-equivalent in this world, it still added up, and I went through my Lay on Hands spell and still lost a lot of my health."

"And what number was your health bar down to when I walked into the kitchen, and why didn't you instantly ask for aid?" Viconia demanded tartly, crossing her arms under her chest. Normally, when she did this, she enjoyed the glance Harry took down at her chest for a second before looking back up at her face, but at the moment, she was a little too irritated.

"Er... around sixteen or so out of my total. As to the second point... I didn't think of it..." Harry frowned. "I think spending so much time at low health after using Blood Magic is like being drained of blood. It makes you kind of forgetful. After using my last Lay on Hands spell, I was able to contrate through it on what I was doing, but my own health kind of stopped registering once I started experimenting." *So there are some dangerous limits to my Gamer's Mind, hmm? When I'm so drained, I get tunnel vision.*

"Do not dip so far into your health pool again, Harry, not for so silly a reason. At least, not without me or Jaheira around to heal you as you go along." Suddenly feeling as if she had shown a little too much concern, Viconia turned her attention to the meal he was preparing. "I take it that you were creating an apology dinner for us on top of the sandwiches?"

"That, and celebrating our new weapons and everything else," Harry shrugged before admitting, "Some of the meat we'd taken on our trip into Beregost was in danger of going bad shortly anyway. Best to use it now."

He turned to look over Viconia's shoulder towards Minsc, who was already eating a sandwich. Minsc blinked, staring at something, and Harry grinned. "However, I did have time to experiment a little bit more, like I said. My narrow focus helped, at least. I discovered I can imbue food with some temporary buffs."

"The Sandwich of Courage!" Minsc bellowed in laughter. "Both Minsc and Boo greatly approve of the name, friend Harry, and the buff as well!"

Turning away from his work on what Viconia supposed would be their dinner, Harry moved over and picked up a small vial of intensely bright blue liquid of some kind, handing it to Viconia. It didn't move like water, more like tar almost in the container and despite the container itself being only the size of a child's mug, there still wasn't a lot in it. "This is my first real triumph in terms of alchemy. This is what I got when I boiled down one of the plants that Jaheira found yesterday, the one I didn't take from her right away."

Flashback:

Wearily leaning on the countertop in the kitchen, Harry stared at the three different ingredients set out in front of him. His eyes, unknown to him, were somewhat bloodshot, but an eagerness to discover what he could do with alchemy drove him on, making Harry ignore his tiredness.

One of the objects was a small thimbleful of healing potion that he had poured out from a stopper. According to his AAS, in such a small amount, a Minor Healing Potion would barely be enough to cure a sore throat, let alone anything else. But it was enough for Harry to start experimenting with. Unfortunately, unlike the time when he looked at the potion of explosion, Harry's Master Chef skill couldn't tell him much about the ingredients within. One of them Harry already knew, the Grey Thistle Vine, but the others were complete unknowns to him, the mixture being too fine for his Master Chef skill to pick out any hints.

The other two were the two different plants that Jaheira had found the day before, the Sharp Grass and another vine. This one was complete with the vine itself, rather than in the case of the Grey Thistles, the thing that grew on the vine.

Brazen Vine

The rather amusingly named vine is actually quite a common vine found throughout the world. It can handle any kind of environment, be it hot, cold, dry or wet, although it will look different depending on the local ecology. To wit, this version has few leaves and has a lot of thin vines to it. In places with lots of rainfall and warm weather, it would have a lot of leaves, and its overall length would be shorter.

The use for this vine remains the same wherever it is found. It does have some nutritional value, being somewhat like potato, and can be used in meals similarly. Up to and including making Brazen Fries, which are a favorite of young people in urban areas, although not only because of the taste. The Brazen Vine also has some strange properties and is an alchemical ingredient as it can produce bursts of courage and almost wild actions in those who eat it. It can be used to add flavor, viscosity or color to a Potion of Heroism and Potions of Healing.

Note: You have not run into a Potion of Heroism before. You do not know what this is.

Raw, the leaves taste like mint. The vine, fried or boiled, tastes like a potato, while raw, it doesn't taste like anything.

Sighing, Harry decided to tackle the vine first. Taking a leaf, he gently touched his tongue to it, then nodded as the taste did match what his AAS had said about them: it did taste a little like mint. Thinking about it, Harry wondered if he could boil it down even if the page didn't say

anything about using the leaves on their own before setting the leaf itself aside and looking at the vine that had been attached to it.

When Harry chopped off a portion of it and stuck it into his mouth, it tasted like nothing. There was literally no taste to it, like the most tasteless radish, yet somehow, the vine had the texture of a potato. “Hmmm...I wouldn’t want my alchemical concoctions to taste bad, so the leaves at least have some uses as is.”

Looking at the interior of the vine, Harry was startled to find that the interior was a dark blue color in sharp contrast to the green exterior, and he hummed thoughtfully, wondering why that was. The piece of vine didn’t give him any buffs or negative effects, which was odd. *Hmm, so cooking brings out whatever can give the small buff to courage?*

Sitting beside one of the leaves in a small pot to boil, Harry used a peeler to take away the exterior of the vine. Setting the exterior skin aside left Harry with a bright blue string of vine, which he began to slice into small slices before putting them all in another pot.

The leaf didn’t seem to be coming apart in the water as Harry had expected it to, instead simply curling in on itself. The vine, however almost instantly began to expand, then come apart slowly in the water as he stirred it. Moreover, the blue spread into the water, and soon Harry noticed that he was having trouble moving the spoon around in the water, which itself began to evaporate quickly, far quicker than it should have on a low boil. Within minutes, this process left behind a tar-like substance. “It looks almost like blue strawberry jam or some kind of glaze...” Harry mused, staring at the dark blue substance.

Once more, his Master Chef skill kicked in quickly.

Glaze of Bravery.

It will taste of mint and could be good once put on certain varieties of meat.

You have created an Alchemical Compound. While its potency isn’t all that much, it is a success.

The Glaze of Bravery will provide a temporary buff against Fear-inducing mental attacks.

However, it is not potent enough to be called a true recipe. Rather, this is a single compound of a more complex formula.

While it will keep, the temporary buff is so small that it is only equivalent to around a fifth of the strength of a Remove Fear cleric-type spell. You would need to have at least a pound of this compound to be able to match the efficacy of that spell.

Harry nodded at that, but he was more interested in the color at the moment. *That... that’s interesting. And it did say that this is an ingredient to a potion of healing...* Comparing that color to the color of the thimbleful of healing potion, Harry saw they were indeed quite

close to being one and the same. The viscosity was vastly different, though. Moving back to take up the leaf, Harry deliberately crushed one of the leaves in his hand, watching it sprinkle into a new pan, before going back and finding some of the grey thistles that Jaheira had found for him the first time he had realized he could turn his Master Chef skills to more.

Here, his Master Chef skill again came in handy, as he knew from the previous entry into his botanical journal that the Grey Thistle Vine was one of the ingredients for healing potions as well.

He added the thistles into the mix after making certain that none of the red thistles were mixed in among them, watching for a few moments. Then he carefully added two more slivers of the vine itself to the mixture, watching as it started to change the color of the water within the pot. After a few seconds on high heat, the boiling water broke down all of the plants, while retaining its water-like viscosity and gaining the blue color he was aiming for.

Turning off the fire, Harry let the water cool for a few moments, then examined it closely.

Poorly Made Healing Potion of Courage

this is a poorly made healing potion, which could only perhaps heal two to four points of health rather than the normal nine minor healing potions normally are able to heal. Further, it carries a small buff to fear-inducing mental attacks, around one-tenth the equivalent of a true cleric-class Remove Fear spell. Useful, but not something that could be relied upon. Thus, this potion is neither a true Weak Potion of Healing nor a Potion of Heroism.

Furthermore, the thistle and the Brazen Vine have collaborated to create a taste that will not be all that pleasant. It will leave the tongue of any individual who drinks the potion a bright orange color for some reason, as well as numb.

Its potency, however, is quite good, being up to that of a normal healing potion. You can actually store this and use it in the future.

This was quickly followed by another even larger notification, one whose edges were marked by the gold of importance.

Congratulations!

You have created three different alchemical products. Yes, your first attempt was a disaster, but even losses can teach you something.

You have started on the path to become an alchemist. At the moment, you will gain no stat bonuses or abilities because you are teaching yourself alchemy as you go along, rather than learning it from a book, which would give you immediate bonuses. However, it's a start.

Advance from a Poor Dabbling Alchemist to a Neophyte, and you may start to see some positive bonuses to your pre-existing Master Chef skill and your Woodcraft.

You are a Poor Dabbling Alchemist. Steps taken to becoming a dabbling alchemist: 3/10.

“Well now, isn’t that interesting,” Harry murmured, eyes alight, before his stomach began to remind him he needed some food. With a sigh, he turned away from his alchemical experiments and began to prepare a meal for the party, wondering why his eyes felt like they were throbbing and the outer edges of his vision were going black.

End flashback

Setting aside her annoyance at Harry’s one-track mind, Viconia’s eyes lit up with interest. “Fascinating! Both the fact that we were correct that you would be able to become an alchemist in the first place and the fact that you are able to see your progress so clearly. Wonderful. Your AAS system is a magnificent tool, Harry. It cannot be said often enough.”

“There is something about being able to see your progress as you go along. So I take it that you will be willing to go along with Minsc for a few days to Get Gud Scrub?” Harry teased, referring to the personal quest that Viconia had created for herself when she spoke to Harry about how she wanted to raise her Strength stat.

“Most assuredly. Although I was surprised that Imoen decided not to join me.” Viconia said, switching the subject slightly. Even with Harry she did not like to speak about her weaknesses.

“Oh, she needs help in Strength too, but I felt we need to keep at least a few of us working with the locals on a daily basis. That’s why I asked her to head around with Minsc and Dynaheir. Tomorrow, it will be Dynaheir and me, and Imoen can join you for strength training in the morning, and then she can head out to the Fisherman’s Lake in the afternoon with Alora and Edwina and you and Jaheira and Khalid can join Dynaheir and me for any larger tasks,” Harry answered.

“I might try to join her for that. While my Wisdom stat is already at fifteen, one can never be too wise, and it might seem a nice respite from the exercises of the morning. My arms and thighs are intensely sore at present,” Viconia admitted with a scowl.

“Hmm... I wonder if I take the Poor Potion of Healing and Courage and turn it into some kind of paste, would it work on sore muscles?” Harry mused.

Behind them, the door to the house opened, and Imoen stuck her head inside, taking a big whiff, before grinning and flinging the door open. “Awesome job cleaning, Harry! And are those sandwiches? I’m hungry. Vai had Dynaheir and me over in the Burning Wizard

investigating a fight there that caused some damage. Let me tell you, dealing with idiots is hungry business.”

“While I would not have put it so bluntly, my companion has a point,” Dynaheir said, smiling lightly at Minsc, who had instantly moved to stand beside her, still chewing on his first sandwich. While he accepted being separated from Dynaheir while they were in the peaceful town, he still didn’t truly like letting her out of his sight for very long. “Then again, any excuse to eat your wonderful food is a good one in my book.”

Harry laughed at that, waving her off and towards the sandwiches. “Those will tide us over until tonight. Did Vai have anything else she wanted us to work on today?”

“There are a few heavy-duty lifting jobs. She said she told you that there might be a few farmers moving into town? Well, I think she downplayed the number of farmers that leave their farms for the winter when she did. Which is kind of strange to me, considering most of those farmsteads look pretty warm,” Dynaheir confessed.

From behind Dynaheir, Jaheira spoke, having led Alora and the others out in the woods back to the house precisely in time for lunch. The breakfast they’d had at the Inn had been that poor a faire to people who would become used to Harry’s cooking. “It is not warmth or companionship farmer families such as that seek in winter, but protection. Recall that we are close to the Forest of Sharp Teeth and that the Sword Coast is not what anyone would call civilized territory. Farmer folk might be handy with axes and hoes, but that is a far cry from defending themselves against a group of bandits looking for a quick killing or a place to hole up for winter themselves or some of the beasts of the forest that in winter go looking for anything edible. Particularly given how the wyverns disrupted the local environment, that is not a small consideration.”

“Yeah, yeah! We ran into some more of those emaciated wolves today. Since Jaheira and I were hidden under our different Hide-in-Shadows skills at the time, they didn’t see us, but they sure looked desperate. Almost as desperate as my uncle Rodrick was for this girl he once met. Come to think of it, I think he had the same kind of wild-eyed look in his eyes, too,” Alora laughed.

Edwina snorted at that before settling into place at the table, picking up half a sandwich daintily. How he was doing so daintily after only a bare day and a half of being a woman, Harry didn’t know. *Perhaps it’s a genetic thing?* “Bah, it is good that we did not need to deal with such. But Jaheira is correct that the majority of the peons will flee into the town for the winter. I hope, however, that this does not mean that that obstreperous winch will have us on guard duty within the various inns and taverns to try and cut down on bar fights.”

"If she does, I doubt it will last long," Khalid soothed, shaking his head with a rueful chuckle. "I've been in towns like this before during wintertime, and those kinds of brawls are seen as simply part of the fun during winter. So long as no knives or other weapons come out, at any rate."

Everyone settled in to eat their sandwiches at that point. After a few bites, Harry explained what he had been up to, gaining some praise from all of the more experienced adventurers and the wizards. Jaheira was a little annoyed that they didn't really have a lot of alchemical ingredients for Harry to experiment with. "It being winter, of course, most plants do not have buds, flowers, or leaves any longer, and all of that could be important in terms of alchemy, drat it. There are very few plants where the entire plant can be used thusly."

"True, my love. But recall that there are other ingredients to alchemy than simply those coming from plants," Khalid said, humming thoughtfully. "There are metals, some jewels as well."

"Maybe, but let's stick to things that my Master Chef skill can help me figure out for now," Harry said, shaking his head firmly. "At the moment, it's giving me such a heads-up that I've been able to make some decent progress in only a day. If I move away from things that I can figure out via cooking, my progress will probably slow to a crawl, if not outright stop. Let me get up to at least an apprentice level before branching out, if I can at all."

Khalid thought about it, then nodded agreement, and the conversation shifted back to winter around here and whether or not all of them were satisfied with their winter gear. Minsc spoke up then, recommending they all get special snow boots, boots that had large whicker bottoms to them that spread the weight of the wearer so they could not sink into the snow. "They are also very warm and comfy for both my feet and little Boo if he is feeling an urge to explore."

The thought of buying some more supplies for the house was also brought up, and agreed to, while Viconia wasn't altogether pleased with the mattress she was using, and Edwina demanded a thicker mattress for herself as well. "This dratted form is far more susceptible to a sore back than my former, more physically imposing body, and requires something a bit firmer."

This became the first thing that the group sought to do after they finished eating lunch. After putting in their orders with the local leather worker for the shoes, though, they went over to Thunderhammer Smithy as planned.

First, when they entered the Smithy, they were greeted by one of the apprentices on duty at the front desk, but when he saw who they were, he asked them to wait and returned with his master quickly.

Taerom Fuiruim nodded his head to all of them. "Och, and there's the adventurers who bra'ght in such an amazing bounty of giant ankheg shells. Here for your three chest plates made ou' of the same material, are ye?"

Harry nodded, moving forward, while beside him, Imoen held back a giggle. For some reason, this guy sounded Irish to her, more Irish than most Irish she had met while going to Hogwarts, frankly. "We are. We're also hoping to buy more, as we agreed before. The sale of some of the rest of the shell will cover the three chest plates, but you told me at the time that there would be more to set aside. Are you willing to also take a promissory note?"

Taerom had been nodding up to that point, yet now he frowned, holding his hand out peremptorily. "Depends on the promissory note. If it's from a bank in Balder's Gate or even in Amn, given whatever you did to get Officer Vai on your case and the current tensions between those powers, I might need to decline."

The promissory note, or, as the messenger who it written it out for Jaheira and Khalid called it, a writ of attestation, had Taerom's eyes widening momentarily. He stared from it to Harry and then the others before shrugging his shoulders. "This is one of the names here is a prominent merchant in town, and another one is a bank in Waterdeep, a name I know well 'nough. A'ight, I'll accept this."

"Excellent. Now, could we see the chest plates first?" Harry then grinned. "After that, we can get to shopping, and bargaining."

Taerom chuckled at that, slapping a powerful hand onto Harry's shoulder before shouting out an instruction to one of his workers. The young boy scurried into the back room, coming back laden with two of the promised chest plates, before racing off for the last.

Harry picked up one of them, reading off the information provided by his AAS eagerly.

Ankheg Plate Mail

This plate mail has been expertly crafted by Taerom Fuiruim of Beregost out of the chitin of the ankheg. It provides a greater degree of protection than traditional plate mail and is not susceptible to rust. It is also light weight and allows for high mobility

Comparing it to full plate mail, Ankheg Plate Mail is -2 against piercing or missile weapons, but +1 against slashing and equal in crushing. Most of all, however, thanks to the nature of Ankhegs, Ankheg Plate Mail has 50% resistance to acid attacks.

The resistance to acid was impressive, as well as the bonus against slashing damage. It wasn't quite as good as full plate armor, but it was almost as good, and Harry looked over at the blacksmith. "Quick question. Is there anything stopping me from taking the arms and leggings from a full plate armor suit and pairing it with this chest plate?"

“Nothing at all,” the man admitted with a grunt, looking a little sour. “It’s just gonna be finicky to work the connecting hinges into both the metal and the chitin. If you have a full plate armor suit to spare the arms and legs from, I’d only charge you a hundred fifty gold for the work of connecting the shoulders to the pauldrons and so forth. Although I will warn you, the overall armor will not be as tough as the original would be in that case.”

Instantly, Harry’s Barter skill and Greater Observation told him that was a lie, or rather, some part of it was. He smiled blandly. “But it would be lighter, easier to move in, and the acid resistance is important I think. Especially since acid resistance means that it can protect against spells like Acid Arrow, right, not just natural acid attacks?”

When Taerom nodded, Harry went on. “As for the price for the work, correct me if I’m wrong, but fittings and such like should be normally done by an apprentice. You’ve already done the hard work in making the Ankheg Chest plate in the first place. If you still have the tools to work it, I don’t see why it would take more than, say sixty gold for the work if I’m providing the material.

Tareom snorted at that, and argued back that working the chitin into a chest pate was one thing. Boring holes in it for the rivets needed for the armor was another. “A hundred and twenty.”

Eventually, the first round of haggling ended with eighty-five gold changing hands, and Harry handed over his chest plate and the full armor plate they had taken from the big bruiser who had been such trouble during the battle in Tranzig’s mansion. As the younger man took the chest plate back and then *oofed* under the weight of the full chest plate, he

added blandly that they could keep the original chest plate from the full suit, adding it to the credit they had already with the store. This caused Taerom to growl a little and he moved forward, grabbing the full plate armor’s chest plate. As he did, his eyes gleamed silver for a second, like molten mercury.

[Taerom has used his own version of greater observation, Smith’s Eyes.](#)

[This ability allows him to discern the quality of any work, as well as determine instantly the price he can charge for any needed repair. It is also incredibly useful when actually smithing, allowing Taerom to discern the makeup of any metal he is working with, the correct temperature, and even allow him to time his hammer strikes for the most opportune moment when smelting metal.](#)

“Hmmm... good, solid metal. No imperfections or weaknesses, built on good iron.” He scowled, admitting. Fine. That would be four hundred more credit to you.”

Harry debated haggling on that point he had already scored a victory once, so simply nodded. He turned, looking over at Jaheira and Viconia, who would be the recipients of the other two Ankheg Chest Plates. Minsc already had a Chest Plate+1, which was good armor for him, and Khalid had his own personal set of full plate armor. Both had been battered and

smashed in places over the time they'd been traveling together, but Harry and Imoen's Repairo spell had been able to see to both bits of armor for the most part, although Khalid did hand his suit over to Taerom for a touch-up of some of the hinges, work that would constitute another hundred and twenty gold.

This was mostly because it was just a cleaning and some bits of interior padding that needed to be replaced, but also showed the impact of the barely neutral stance the locals had towards Harry and his party.

You can tell that while Taerom personally likes you – mainly for the fact he'll be able to make at least two more outfits out of the ankheg chitin you brought in – he is also leery of you due to the 'rumors' and such that have spread. You will be able to haggle with him, but you'll only be able to haggle Taerom down so far for any of the items you're going to buy.

Seeing that, Harry could only sigh, but it was too late to back out now. And frankly, Harry wanted his whole party to be as well-armed now as they could get. They were getting to the point where the response from Tranzig's death could be arriving from the Iron Throne or whoever was pulling the strings, and the battle in the mansion was still in Harry's head, pushing him to be ready for the worst.

Looking over at Jaheira and Viconia, Harry smiled, seeing both women were incredibly happy with the armor they were given, especially Viconia. She was able to use a normal chest plate, but while also wielding a hammer and shield, it slowed her down a good bit. The weight of the Ankheg Plate was so low she didn't really notice it, and Harry watched her perform some moves to one side, shifting this way and that, throwing out blows, covering herself for their shield, dancing backward and to the side and so forth.

"You do good work, Taerom," Harry said with a smile, still watching the currently pale-skinned elf go through her moves.

"Ya brought me good material," Taerom grunted, a faint smile on his face. "Although if'n yer tryin' ta butter me up before we barter again, tis not gonna work."

Harry chuckled at that and then gestured to the objects on the wall behind the man who was manning the front desk. "Gentlemen, ladies, anything striking your fancy?"

A Medium Shield+1 instantly called to Jaheira and Viconia. The two women spoke to one another for a few brief moments before Jaheira acceded that Viconia was more likely to enter hammer range than Jaheira was. Viconia was a better flanker than Jaheira, who was a better shot with a sling and had a few more offensive-type spells. She also had an Amulet of Protection+1 already, so her defense was actually quite good as it was. The party also had a set

of armor-giving gloves which were routinely passed around, although mostly used by the two thieves.

As they did, Taerom frowned. "Ain't ye the ones who bought a Medium Shield+1 from me before? What happened to it?"

"Er... shattered and lost in an underground river, actually," Harry muttered, while Jaheira actually flushed a bit, looking away in embarrassment. It had been her shield at the time, and while it had been badly battered against Mulahey and his trio of woman warrior assassins, Harry had been forced to strip it off her and toss it aside in his haste to get Jaheira's armor off her before the watery trap Xan had tripped had washed them both away. Jaheira had been unconscious at the time, thanks to a falling rock, but that still didn't deaden the embarrassment she felt at having lost one of the better bits of her equipment.

Harry instantly began to haggle for that item specifically while the others continued to examine the products on offer. A Sling+1 was examined and then added for Edwina, although she had to argue with Dynaheir about it. Jaheira already had a Sling+2 from the Friendly Arm Inn, while Imoen similarly already owned a Short Sword+1.

Anora received a Small Shield+1. Harry figured it would help her if she could not retreat from close combat at some point. She didn't want a Short Sword+1, but did accept some Leather Armor+1. Minsc decided to trade in his regular longbow for a compound longbow, quickly showing that he could pull the new bow to its fullest extent easily enough. Trading in his original longbow allowed Harry to pay the remaining price of fifty gold easily which he didn't even haggle over.

In contrast, when it came to bargain with Taerom about Anora's gear along with the Medium Shield+1, he was able to haggle for all three being only worth two-thirds of the remaining ankheg shells. That meant their line of credit, thanks to the chest plate, was around one thousand two-hundred left. Harry instantly offered the emeralds to add to that, along with the strange, enchanted Ioun Stone.

When they finished haggling over the price for the Ioun Stone, Taerom's eyes lit in a way that Harry made Harry realize that he might have just made a bad deal with that, something his greater Observation Skill agreed with. Yet Harry felt he had made up for it with the price of the ankheg shells and the fact that the man was willing to take a promissory note in the first place.

Next added to the list of purchases was a Quarterstaff+1 for Dynaheir, who apparently was proficient with the weapon. Jaheira was too, but already had the staff enchanted further by the Elder Dryad. Khalid and Harry debated on a Tower Shield+1 for a time, but Khalid eventually shook his head. The tower shield was too clunky for him, and Khalid had a decent defensive bonus as it was thanks to his personal sword. Harry thought about it, but he already had a

Tower Shield+1, and Minsc didn't use Shield and Sword Style all that often. The big guy very much preferred his claymore and Chelsey's Crusher.

Eventually, he decided against it because there was one item that looked almost perfect for Imoen and Alora to share between them when they were off on lone scouting missions.

Shadow Armor.

Shadow armor is studded leather armor created for use by the Shadowmasters of Amn. The Shadowmasters are of the highest order within the Shadow Thief hierarchy, and they demand only the best.

While only leather armor in weight, Shadow Armor has been enchanted to aid its wearer in the base thief skill, Hide-in-Shadows. And even once found, this armor provides extremely good protection for something made out of seemingly normal leather, giving +3 to the defense of the wearer against all types of weapons in comparison to normal brigandine or studded leather armor.

That addition to Hide-in-Shadows is insane as well as plus three to protection to armor? Still not as good as full plate armor would be, but since as thieves they can't use heavy armor, that's good enough, Harry thought excitedly.

There was also a crossbow, but Harry felt the Shadow Armor was better for their party, as it could be used by two people. Whereas the Army Killer was something only Harry would be able to use, and poorly since he didn't have any proficiency in crossbows just yet.

When it came to the Shadow Armor, Taerom and Harry haggled for nearly twenty minutes without stop, both of them pushing hard. Their Hagglng skills seemed equally matched thanks to the wary neutral stance of the locals aiding Taerom. Eventually, Harry was able to bring the price of the Shadow Armor, which Taerom began at the price of fifteen thousand seven hundred and fifty gold, down to eleven thousand seven hundred. The majority of it was covered by the promissory note, and the rest from the remaining shells, two of the emeralds and the loan Stone. This left the group with around two thousand gold in total from the remaining emeralds, and both Harry and Taerom walked away, pleased with how it had gone.

That evening, the group returned home in good spirits, which they retained in the morning despite the day being even colder than the previous one. Harry had kept the alarm aspect of his AAS off, letting all of them sleep as long as each of them wanted. And for adventurers, that was the height of luxury, and everyone there reveled in it.

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As the weather started to become colder with each passing day and sleet began to become hail, the party fell into a pattern. In the morning, they would all split up to do what Harry and Imoen referred to as grinding. Thanks to Harry's AAS (and the Oaths/friendships that bound them all into the same party), all of them could build on their stats beyond Jaheira and Khalid. For Viconia, this meant doing exercises with Minsc in the morning, something that Imoen reluctantly agreed to join. In the afternoon, the two of them, Alora, Dynaheir and Edwina, would travel to the fisherman's lake with Minsc as bodyguard just in case, with Dynaheir put in charge of the group by Harry.

Meanwhile, Jaheira, Khalid and Harry would take on tasks around the town, sometimes with Khalid and Jaheira switching out with Minsc. Normally when Vai informed Harry that this or that farm family needed help bringing in their livestock or precious items.

This was an interesting process, as Harry hadn't realized that the town had several open areas within it devoted to farm animals during the wintertime. Beyond that, there were also houses that, like the one that they were currently residing in, were empty during summer, spring and most of all autumn, but which filled up during the winter. As many as three or four farm families would settle into one townhouse. The confines were close but warm and protected.

As Jaheira had remarked, only a few families stayed where they were. These were **big** families, normally of eight or more people, including their farm hands, with at least five or six men capable of wielding longbows and axes, with the farmhouse built of heavy stone and normally with an outer wall surrounding it. A few even had platforms on their roofs for watchers.

During this time, Alora and Minsc proved to be the best at working with the locals. Alora being good at it was pretty obvious, in Harry's opinion. The little Halfling just had a way with people. She could chatter at you for several moments, and so long as the person she was talking to had even a hint of a funny bone, they would instantly become friends with her. On the other hand, Minsc being good with kids was somewhat thing of a surprise. But it seemed as if none of the youngsters were scared of the large, odd-looking ranger. That, and Boo was a particularly good draw as well.

All told the continued work with the locals was almost as fruitful as the grinding over the next few weeks. Harry even received the notification of an update to the quest An Oath Fulfilled.

Most of the locals of Beregost, barring a few more focal xenophobes, are willing to accept your party at face value at this point. Taerom in particular, is one of your biggest supporters among the locals, although his word is placed against that of Vai. Kelddath is also warily neutral

towards you personally after the battle against the priest of Cyric and his horde of skeleton warriors and professionally thankful for the effort.

On the other side of the scales, Vai still looks at you as a Drow Lover, although she will not share the reasoning behind her distaste for you. The distaste does still carry over to much of the locals as they aren't willing to fully trust you, but they don't dislike you anymore.

Just keep on going and keep Viconia's skin the color it is currently, and you should be fine going forward.

Of course, during this time, there are also some more personal things going on. Jaheira and Khalid were able to escape the rest of the party for dates several times, heading to one of the Inns, although, amusingly to Harry, both of them confided to him later, one after another, that they had become somewhat spoiled with his meals when it came to food and didn't enjoy the meals at the inn as much as the date should have warranted.

However, having a room entirely to themselves and, moreover, not needing to worry about what the people in the rooms to either side of them might think was quite helpful for their well-being on the marital side of things. Normally, half-elves wouldn't need to take such a physical step to renew their relationships. But the past few months have been so trying that both of them needed this kind of outlet and way to renew their affection towards one another.

Meanwhile, Viconia and Harry also had a night together about a week and a half after they returned from the High Hedge. Although, in their case, it was more chance and serendipity that allowed them to get some alone time to push the relationship along.

As with most evenings, Harry was the first one back, and after spending a turn of the candle working on his alchemy skill (6/10 at present, although all three new concoctions had been failures), he turned his attention to cooking the evening meal. Edwina and Alora would not be joining them for the meal. Having found that there were games of chance to be, Edwina and Alora were eager to test their hand-eye skills.

Edwina felt that her new form would give her a leg up against the competition in many ways. In her words, "I have noticed numerous times how this body seems to act like a lodestone for men's eyes. And like many a woman before, I am willing to put it to use. Although if anyone attempts to touch me with their vile manual labor-infused hands, I will turn them into a torch."

Minsc, Jaheira, Khalid and Dynaheir were out on the farms, helping yet another family move into the town. Harry didn't know when the four would return but figured it would be sometime soon and that they'd be hungry when they arrived.

He noticed a green dot enter the house and smiled, showing over his shoulder, "I'm almost done in here. If you could set the table, that would be a help."

"I rather think that is not as good at use of my time, or indeed your time as you think." Viconia's voice answered him. "Oh, and I wish to inform you, Harry," she said as Harry heard her close the door firmly behind her. "Imoen decided to join the odd duo in their journey into games of chance. She believes that her Flirty Little Lass ability could be put to good use in aiding them in winning such games."

Harry nodded at that, snickering. "Yeah, I should have expected that, honestly. That's pure Imoen, really." Then blinked, realizing suddenly that the two of them were all alone in the house. "So, does that mean we are on our own for a bit?"

"It does indeed," Viconia nearly purred.

Her tone acted like a whip across Harry's back and he stiffened, turning away from his work on dinner. He watched as Viconia carefully pulled off her boots, leaving her in bare feet for a moment, possible only because of the warmth of the fireplace in the main room. She then padded over the floor into the kitchen, her eyes locked on Harry's, sensual and yet predatory at the same time.

It reminded Harry somewhat of the elder dryad's look but was strangely more forthright or more demanding perhaps? Whatever it was, he kind of liked it.

Without further word or preamble, Viconia finished crossing the distance between them, entering the kitchen quickly. There, she pushed Harry back up against the countertop, leaning up and kissing him ardently.

Harry gave as good as he got, slowly turning the pair of them around until Viconia was pressed against the side of the small table set in the kitchen. With a quick hug, Harry lifted Viconia up a bit, planting her rear on the table.

Viconia smiled at that, her tongue dominating Harry's for a few seconds in his mouth as her legs wrapped around him. She then began to work her way down Harry's throat, biting and licking. "It is about time that we move things forward," she mock-grumbled before licking and biting at his throat again, leaving a hickey this time. "Flirtations can only be enjoyed for so long."

Harry grunted at the pain of it but devoted himself to one of her ears, causing Viconia to shutter a bit. "I agree, although when we get to that point, we will need to take precautions. you know."

"Precautions... Oh, yes!" Viconia said, not getting it at first before understanding dawned on her. "That **is** a concern. I will need to speak to Alora about such things before we get to that point. Perhaps she can point me to a apothecary or someone similar." She then smirked wickedly. "However, before you can unleash your lusts upon me in such a manner, you must

prove worthy of such pleasure by first pleasing me. And now, what would please me most is that you divest yourself of your jerkin. We are both wearing altogether too much clothing.”

To put it bluntly, Viconia was horny. As a drow, she had been used to living what most would consider a cross between a sadistic and licentious lifestyle. Yet it had been several years since she had last been with a man. She had been on the run in the Underdark for more than two years, with only Shar’s patronage aiding her. Then, on the surface, she had been unwilling to take the caravan boss as a lover, an episode which had led directly to her fleeing the territory around Balder’s Gate and then meeting Harry. Further, over the past few weeks not an evening had gone by without Harry and Viconia flirting, sometimes very physically with one another as they cooked or had brief moments without anyone else around. Kisses and light touches over the clothing had worked quite well on more than one occasion to rile her up.

Harry was also a bit pent up but worried about a few things in terms of group dynamics, the future and the fact that there really wasn’t going to be a future with Viconia, considering that at this point, he had kept things slow. They all figured that, eventually, they would need to go to Balder’s Gate to get to the bottom of the iron ore issue and whoever had killed Harry’s father, Gorion. And there was no way that Viconia would be willing to enter a major city, no matter what relationship she had with Harry at the time they did, especially one she’d been forced to flee from before. She had said so several times.

But right now, none of that really registered to Harry. What did was the fact that Viconia was slowly pulling off her own jerkin as she looked at him expectantly, the heat of her body, her legs around his waist, her core gently but very firmly beginning to shift and wiggle against his own growing arousal causing all deeper thoughts to flee his brain.

Lime Start:

Harry decided to set all of those problems aside for now and simply enjoy the moment. Reaching forward quickly, taking Viconia’s hands in his own, holding her, then kissing her on the lips before slowly undoing the ties for her and then pulling Viconia’s shirt up and over her head.

Viconia’s chest and upper body were thus revealed, her hair slowly falling back over her shoulders. The dark silver waves of it proved a stark contrast to her currently blue skin as always, Harry having canceled the color change charm on her when she entered the kitchen so automatically that it hadn’t even registered to either after the past few weeks. Her chest was not as large as Dynaheir, let alone the elder dryad Harry had previously slept with, but it was still a nice handful, and Harry’s greater observation skills pointed to places on her chest, neck and stomach that might be erogenous zones, thanks to his Sexual Awareness skill, which he had gotten it from losing his virginity to the elder dryad after the party had conquered the gnoll fortress.

Her breasts were firm and perky as Harry began to play with them, but Viconia slapped his hands away and glared at him, poking him hard in the stomach. "You have yet to take your own shirt off, Harry! I do not like being kept waiting."

Laughing quietly at that, Harry, without taking a step away out of her legs where they hugged him around his waist, pulled his shirt off and tossed it to the side, causing her to smile, taking in the view approvingly. She had been with human men before, but all of them had been scarred slaves. Even the youngest of them had marks on their body from captivity among her people. Harry didn't. The only scar he had was the lightning bolt scar on his forehead, which added more to his character than anything else. Moreover, Harry's lack of hair was actually quite nice, and not just on his face.

When Viconia moved one hand down towards his breaches, Harry decided to no longer simply stand there. His hands came back up, drawing up either side of her body, then over her bra, not removing it yet, before up her face and to her ears, lightly tracing them, then back down. His fingers made tiny circles on the small pink dots he could see, thanks to his Sexual awareness skill, but he didn't give them too much more attention than the rest of Viconia's body.

Even so, Viconia shuttered, feeling a blush begin to suffuse her features. *By Shar, I did not expect to feel so good from so light touch!*

When she had lain with human men before, they had fallen into two categories, either docile tools that she could use to get herself off or too-aggressive gladiators, eager to conquer one of their mistresses in the only area that they could, the bedroom. Harry, though? He was **exploring** her as if touching every inch of her was his current goal and one he was very eager to achieve, uncaring of his own needs. That and the look of awe and desire on his face made Viconia feel powerful in a way that even regaining her powers through her faith in Shar or turning the tables and dominating a gladiator had not before. It was a strange kind of power built on her own femininity, yet not in the same way as it had been previously.

Soon, Viconia reached into his pants and began to fondle his manhood. Her hand moved slowly, two fingers at a time, just running up and down and around it, feeling his balls, feeling the lack of hair down there with some delight. "You shaved down there as well?"

"Imoen actually came up with a spell for that back in Candlekeep," The Depilatory Spell was one of the first ones that Imoen had taught Harry when he talked about how he'd no desire to grow a beard considering them itchy and annoying.

"Hmmm... Remind me to thank Imoen at some point. Perhaps when we are both deep into our cups, so she cannot quite understand what I'm saying," Viconia murmured before leaning up into a kiss.

The two of them spent several moments simply kissing, their hands exploring. Harry reveled in touching Viconia's entire body from the chest up while Viconia concentrated on his manhood, having already explored his chest and stomach muscles. She was impressed by his length, which was on the upper scale for a human male, far thicker around than that of a drow and actually thicker than most humans she had lain with, too. The lack of hair was also quite nice, adding to the sensation of skin on skin when she began to slowly work her hand up and down his shaft, then down to his balls.

The kiss and the gentle touches were pushing Viconia along quite nicely, but they weren't enough, and she was about to demand that Harry start to do something similar to what she was doing to him when he unclasped her bra, causing her to blink a moment. She had lost track of one of his hands as they kissed.

Urged by his Perception skill, Harry pulled back from the kiss, working his lips down her body, staring at her chest again for a few seconds even as he kissed every inch of her he could reach while his eyes locked on her breasts like they were lodestones and his eyes were metal filings. As he had seen before when she had a bra on, her breasts were quite firm, yet they bounced and moved lightly with her breath almost entrancingly. They were capped furthermore with black nipples that first his gaze, then his mouth after a few seconds.

Viconia hissed in arousal before slowly working one hand through Harry's hair, her other hand gripping his shaft all the harder and beginning to pump faster. "I am not some delicate human flower," she moaned. "Harder, Harry!"

Harry, on the other hand, had an idea. He had been wondering about the Parseltongue skill for a while. Now seemed a great time to use it. Picturing a snake in his mind, he began. "You are so beautiful, so gorgeous!"

The vibrations of this on her nipple caused Viconia to first squeak, then moan so loudly that, had anyone else been in the house, they would've been heard regardless of the room. "YeSSSS< HARRY! By Shar, what is that!?"

"I can talk to snakes," Harry mumbled around her nipple. "They talk via vibrating their tongue."

Before Viconia could realize the full implications of that, her eyes crossed as Harry switched to her other nipple, quickly doing the same thing there, while the fingers of one of his hands began to play with the nipple he just left, tweaking and tugging and pinching. The combination was enough to cause Viconia to shriek, her first orgasm of the night coming on her with a suddenness that she had not anticipated.

As she came down from her orgasm, Viconia pulled Harry's head away from her chest, pushing his head down further. She desperately wanted to feel the effects of that vibrating tongue on even more sensitive areas.

Despite his Perception telling him precisely what Viconia wanted, Harry fought back, reaching up to grab the hand that was in his hair and squeeze her wrist gently but firmly, kissing her hard on the lips before murmuring, "But don't you think it's a little selfish for you to want me to do all the work?"

Grumbling at that, Viconia began to work the hand that was still holding his shaft harder. In response, Harry trailed his fingers down her body into Viconia's britches. His other hand went below her, lifting her rear up off the table so he could pull her pants down her thighs. That was enough area to work with, and Harry's fingers began to move up and down her panties, which were already soaked with Viconia's first orgasm. The blue-skinned woman shivered at the touch, but it wasn't enough again, and she resolutely concentrated on getting Harry off quickly so he could then concentrate on her even more.

With his experience with the elder dryad, that didn't happen very quickly. Viconia was almost getting too frustrated to be turned on when he finally grunted and began to thrust into her hands, both of which were working his shaft now as the pair of them exchanged kisses, heavy on the tongue. Soon, he came, covering both of her hands and practically drenching his pants to the point it looked almost like someone had poured something on top of his crotch.

Backing away from the kiss, Viconia pulled both of her hands out of Harry's pants. She looked at them covered with his essence before slowly raising one to her face as Harry watched, his own hands still working on her breasts and over the surface of her panties.

When Viconia began to lick at his cum and make pleased noises, Harry pulled her panties aside and began to work one finger into her, causing her to hiss in pleasure, although despite her eyes being half-closed with pleasure, her gaze was still demanding. However, Harry kept teasing her, reaching, using one hand on her breast as the other just kept slowly moving up and down over her panties.

This caused Viconia to scowl, but she continued to lick and suckle at the cum plastered to her hands. At least this wasn't unpleasant for Viconia. She had given head to several men before, although Harry's was by far the tastiest. *Perhaps there is something to the fact that diets impact such things?*

Only when she was finished did Harry, lifting his head from one of her breasts, begin to move down her body. Anticipation filled Viconia, although, for a few seconds, Harry simply licked and nibbled at her outer lips, taking in the sight of how black her womanhood was in

comparison to her blue skin. It was an astonishing sight, a black rose on a blue backdrop. He spent moments just looking at it, his finger slowly moving in and out of her.

Then, just as Viconia was going to get angry and annoyed, he dove down with all of the haste of the man offered water in a desert. His tongue entered her, and Viconia hissed in pleasure, pleasure which began to ratchet upwards as Harry began to use his Parseltongue technique. Not forming full words this time, just making noises, the equivalent of reciting the alphabet with spaces in between.

Harry wanted to savor this, and savor it, he did.

Viconia moaned, lifting her hips up and down, urging Harry to give her more sensation, but Harry tortured her for several more moments, making Viconia realize that this could be a form of sexual domination. The withholding of an orgasm. She had used it on one or two men while back with her family, demanding that they please her before reaching their own tipping point.

But to have it turned on her was... Viconia tried to think, to find it demeaning, tried to believe that Harry was being cruel to her, but the look of adoration he looked up at her with occasionally, the amount of concentration he was giving to his task, she couldn't believe that. *Shar, that look, that worship, damn it, so good!*

When her second orgasm came, it came with all the power of an avalanche. She shrieked so loud that some of the cups nearby started to rattle, her hands gripping Harry's hair so hard that it hurt. Harry ignored it, simply speaking Parseltongue into her pussy to keep her crescendo going.

Eventually, Viconia's shuddering began to subside, and she released her hold on Harry's hair, gently reaching down to tug at his ears, pulling him up to her. Harry tried to pause for a moment, but Viconia didn't let him, pulling him into a kiss.

Luckily, enough time had passed that any taste of Harry's own ejaculation on Viconia's lips had long disappeared, but Harry was surprised that Viconia didn't seem to care about the taste of her own juices on his own lips. She seemingly enjoyed it, humming appreciatively into his mouth. "That was magnificent, Harry!" She said, pulling back, letting their four heads rest against one another. "We will have to do this again!"

"Too bloody right..." Harry said, slowly bumping his erection, which had returned by this point, into Viconia's no longer play panty-clad core, the only thing separating them being his own shorts. "If you would like to return the favor, I would be more than willing to..."

At that point, the door to the house opened, and voices could be heard outside. The two lovers stared at one another wide-eyed for a second before Harry quickly pulled back, using a

clean charm on himself as he moved to be visible from the doorway into the kitchen, taking up the cooking utensils again. In contrast, Viconia grabbed at her clothing and rolled across the table, only her lightweight, allowing it to sustain the movement to drop out of cover into one of the corners, where she hastily began to put her clothing back on.

End Lime

OOOOOOO

Winter finally closed in on Beregost, and with it came snow. The first few times, it was simply a nice, thin veneer of snow, leaving everything covered in a soft layer of white snow, a sight that Viconia truly enjoyed.

“I have never seen snow before! There are obviously places in the Underdark that are ridiculously cold, but it has nothing to do with anything you surface folk would call weather,” She murmured in a low tone as she looked around them in wonder. “And you see that snow is simply frozen water?”

Alora grinned, tossing a snowball that she had painstakingly made towards Khalid. The half-elf saw it coming out of the corner of his eye and sidestepped, letting it sail past to smack into Minsc’s back. Minsc turned, grinned playfully, and then began to try to make his own snowball with little success, given how little snow was on the ground just yet as Alora answered Viconia’s question. “Yep! You have to ask someone who’s studied the weather a lot more than it ever interested me to tell you why it becomes snow instead of ice, but I very much prefer snow to the sleet we’ve been getting. With snow, you can have fun. Sleet is just annoying.”

“Preaching to the choir,” Imoen said, causing several of the others to laugh both in agreement and at the irony of that statement due to what Imoen had been up to. Whenever she was free from grinding, Imoen spent a lot of time with the sirines over at the temple of the morning Lord. She had become friends with all four and could routinely be found dancing alongside them or just hanging out with them after the sun went down.

Given his connection to the sun, worship of the Morning Lord ended at sunset. With winter upon them this meant the massive temple ceased worship quite a bit sooner than normal, but that didn’t mean that the individuals within were any less busy. Much like many of the homes in Beregost, the temple played host throughout the winter to other people. In the temple’s case, a trade caravan stayed there who apparently had some kind of connection to the priesthood of Lathander. The two merchants in charge of the caravan planned the trip to and from the north to the south in order to remain here during the wintertime. Why that was, Harry had no idea, but it seemed to work for them and the town alike, as Vai could now call on twenty more guards, who she incorporated into the rest of the Beregost Town Guard with ease.

Better for Harry and the others, Imoen had been making contacts with the traders. She had also become quite friendly with the priest Kelddath along with the sirines, something that had offset the negative reaction from some of Harry's alchemical mishaps over the past few weeks.

Harry wasn't certain what to make of Imoen's interest in the sirines. He had at first thought it was merely the fact they seemed like fun girls to hang out with to the pink-haired girl. But for a few days now, he had been wondering if maybe she had other reasons to be interested in the worship of Lathander. It was just a feeling, with no backing from his Greater Observation skills, but Harry still wondered.

"You like it now, but trust me, when the snow is up to your waist, and you're called out every morning to help shovel it out of the way or burn the snow into water, it stops being fun," Jaheira grumbled. True to what Khalid had said weeks back, her attitude had taken a dangerous nosedive as the temperature started to drop.

As for Khalid himself, there had been a motion among the group to go back to using the annoying 'you have slept for eight hours' announcement type alarm. It seemed a fair price to Jaheira and any of the others who had been forced to try and get Khalid up and moving in the morning.

There were actually two reasons for this. One was obviously the fact that Khalid simply was insanely lethargic in the morning, and he wasn't the only one. Alora was astonishingly hard to get out of her bedroll, as was, surprisingly, Dynaheir. In her case, she was used to having a specific kind of drink in the morning, but the ingredients for it did not exist on the Sword Coast, and the cold made her just as lethargic without that as Khalid to start the day. Whereas Alora was the type to stay up, chattering to whoever she could or reading a book late into the night, paying for it the next morning.

But the more important factor was the fact that the AAS tied that alarm into the speed with which people could fall asleep as well as the **depth** of that sleep. With the alarm system on, as soon as Harry or any of his party members laid out and got comfortable in bed, they were dead to the world asleep and would remain so until the alarm woke them up. For Viconia, in particular, a complete night's sleep without being woken up from nightmares was a godsend, one it had taken her several weeks to realize was actually occurring and then connect to Harry's unique abilities.

The same could be said for Dynaheir, Khalid and Jaheira, who both had night terrors. Jaheira often had nightmares based on a few adventures in her younger years and the disaster that had led to her and Khalid laboring under the Curse of the Dread One, a nightmare she

shared with her husband. Dynaheir's night terrors were from a far more recent event, her captivity in the gnoll fortress having scarred her in several ways.

"Hey! If it's up to your waist, it's almost above my head. And I still have fun with it," Alora huffed. "Can you imagine what kind of fort I could make with that amount of snow?"

"Fortress?" Viconia asked quizzically. She looked down at the white stuff everywhere, then shook her head. "Surely this stuff cannot be used in such a manner. I see that you can pack it into a small snow globe, but that is a far cry from anything even a child would call a fortress."

Alora grinned, and Edwinaa began to chuckle. "Oh, now you've done it," he murmured right before Alora could shout, "Challenge accepted!"

"Minsc will join in on this challenge!" Minsc boomed. Unlike all of the others, who were bundled up as warmly as they could, Minsc disdained such. He still wore only his leather jerkin under his armor, leaving most of his arms bare up to the shoulder, and didn't even seem to feel the cold, so long as it wasn't the wet, clinging sort as they had to deal with from rain and sleet on several occasions. "This kind of weather reminds me of Rasheman more than anything else I have seen in this land, and well, can I remember making a large fortress alongside Boo. My tiny companion is an excellent tunneller."

Viconia's delight in the snow did not fade as it kept on coming, practically every other day, a few inches here, a few inches there to start with, then, as Beregost's communal preparation for winter ended, inches gave way to six to eight inches, then a foot, then more. At that point, Viconia began to lose some interest in it, the novelty having worn off.

However, Alora and Minsc did not, and every day, they were the first out of the house. Alora would stay close, building what amounted to a giant snow fort out on the road, with several of the children of the town joining in enthusiastically. Minsc would join in that endeavor occasionally, although he, Khalid and Harry were also called in to help keep walk paths clear through the main thoroughfares and to each of the houses. This was a huge project, one that everyone in the town who was strong enough contributed to.

Meanwhile, Dynaheir and Edwinaa were called upon on several occasions to burn large segments of snow occasionally. The locals had a system for this kind of thing that allowed them to purify the snow once it was turned into water, giving the town a source of water even though the wells had frozen over.

Nor did their work for Vai stop. Everyone had to occasionally go out on patrol around the town. Most of the time, these patrols were around six days long as they pushed out from the town for a day and then circled it, but sometimes, the patrols were close, moving around the outskirts of the farmlands. On such patrols, the adventurers and guards were sometimes paired

together, which made for some tense moments. Luckily, the adventurer parties work up till now with the townsfolk stood them in good stead.

Vai was also 'kind' enough to tell Harry and the others every morning when she wanted them to split up like that. That allowed Harry to pull Viconia back to work with him or Minsc in the town, normally joining Dynaheir so that Minsc would not fret about his witch so much.

Yet despite all the work they were doing for the town, the grinding for Imoen and Viconia continued. Soon, both of them had earned four Strength points. This put them both above halfway to the total seven points the pair could both earn this way, something both of them were very happy for. Alora also succeeded in her training with Jaheira and Minsc in moving silently through the woods, making her as good at scouting as Imoen, although neither of them had anything like the experience Minsc and Jaheira had in reading terrain and wood lore.

While his alchemy experiments had slowed (he now had 8/10 needed to advance), Harry also finished up the training he had been getting from Khalid. His Stance, Lower Body Strength, and Body Movement combat abilities all re-merged with his regular weapon-based combat skills, giving him 2 Stat points he could put to any physical Stat. Harry decided to assign them to Durability, bringing that up to 14. He hoped that if he could raise that stat, it would start to really have an impact on how much damage he could take, even without his armor.

All in all, their time spent stuck in Beregost was proving very fruitful for everyone in the party. Yet a month after the first snow began to fall, the adventurers' lives, and that of the town, became fraught once more.

After two days straight with no new snow, Harry was able to head out on patrol rather than remain in the town. He chose to bring along Jaheira and Khalid because they were the ones mainly doing the daily patrols. The two of them were easily able to deal with the cold thanks to the coats and everything else they had bought, and Jaheira's Druid abilities made her excellent for any kind of patrol that pushed out further than the town's outer edges. Since they were out on patrol on their own, he also decided to bring along Dynaheir and Minsc.

Heading out early that morning, the group of five pushed out to the west first. The plan was to then cut north before going back east, heading south through the Wood of Sharp Teeth before finishing a semi-square patrol around the town. As they did, the adventurers would push out further than the Beregost guards would, looking for trouble rather than looking for farmers who needed help for whatever reason.

As they went, the group ran into a few beasts, but none of them attacked the group of five, most retreating the instant they spotted the two legs, while the rest simply tried to hide or watched, not approaching or retreating.

However, as they started to move south through the Wood of Sharp Teeth towards the southeastern corner of their patrol, Jaheira, who had been out ahead of the rest of the party, came back toward them. Harry didn't call a halt, simply warning the others that she was coming back towards him for some reason, which caused Khalid and Minsc to ready their weapons just in case and for Dynaheir to tighten the grip on her quarterstaff, her other hand coming out of her pocket in preparation for casting.

Normally, Dynaheir would be readying a slingstone. However, with the amount of snow on the ground, she very much preferred to have the quarterstaff on hand to help her get along.

Soon, Jaheira came out of the woods ahead of them, her Forest Meld disappearing, her boots now making noises as they crunched on the hardpacked snow. "There is something wrong in these woods," the druid began without a preamble.

"given what we've run into in the past in these woods, you'll have to be more specific, Jaheira," Harry answered dryly. "Are you saying that the Shadow Druids are back? That another band of wyverns has moved in?"

"No. Nothing like that. The trees speak to me of outsiders. The shadow Druids are not outsiders. This is more like the feeling I was getting before we fought Bassilus and his skeletons, although it does not feel as... against basic nature as that. No, this is simply the feel of people who do not belong being here moving through the woods in sufficient numbers that the wood has taken notice."

"T, t, that last is significant, Harry," Khalid murmured, frowning. "In a w, w, way, we ourselves are outsiders to the w, w, woods bar my wife. But e, e, even if we did not have her a, a, along, we would not make a big e, e, enough impact on the woods to be so f, f, felt by another druid."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Are we talking about one large band or several small ones? Are we talking bandits, hobgoblins, or soldiers? What can you tell me?"

"I'm getting the impression of a few medium-sized bands, but that is all the impression of the forest I can get. That and a vague sense of direction towards the nearest one. They're coming up from the south of our current position."

"If they're coming from the south, friend Jaheira, why would they not simply be following the road if they are outsiders to the woods?" Minsc asked in some confusion.

"They could be foraging. In winter, they'd have to go well out of their way to do that. Or they did follow the road for significant portions but have broken off from it now for some reason," Harry said, frowning now.

Jaheira nodded his way, and Harry absently noted that he had one another few friendship points with her with his perspicacity.

It is evident that Jaheira very much prefers intelligent companions, and your grasp of what this could be is more than welcome in her eyes.

“Let’s push on until we start to see signs of this group that you say is nearest us. At that point, Jaheira, Minsc, how close do you think you could get to a group of people who don’t really know their way around the woodland?”

“There Is a difference between not belonging to the forest and not knowing your way to move through it,” Jaheira warned before modifying her statement a bit. “I would say though, that bandits and such are normally not very good about putting out guards. We should be able to get within sight range, at least without much worry.”

“What about taking prisoners?” Harry pressed, causing Jaheira and Minsc to both frown, looking at one another thoughtfully.

“Taking prisoners like that is far harder than killing them,” Dynaheir warned.

“And the impression I’m getting is diffuse,” Jaheira added. “It might take us several hours, perhaps even the rest of the day and tomorrow, to get close enough to let me discern more of what this threat might be. Especially given how quickly night comes in the winter.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully. Vai had been very specific about how far out they should travel. She liked the idea of using the adventurers to push out further from Beregost, yet it wasn’t just Jaheira’s basic attitude that had changed during the winter. Vai had become even more... well... bitchy and annoying to deal with. If they overshot the time they were due back, she might take it poorly. Which in turn would impact the An Oath Fulfilled quest.

However, this felt important. It wasn’t enough to trigger a quest or a change to the Iron Intake Issue or anything like that, so maybe these groups of bandits or whatever that were making such an impression on the forest didn’t have anything to do with Harry and company. But maybe they did. Maybe they had something to do with the town. It was better to know than not, Harry decided. “I think we need to get to the bottom of this. Let’s move on. Jaheira, guide us as best your vague feelings can.”

Jaheira nodded firmly, approval shining in her eyes as Khalid also nodded, slapping Harry’s shoulder lightly. The two Harpers were used to looking for trouble and had long since decided that Harry’s nose for such was an excellent tool. Dynaheir and Minsc also looked pleased, and the group began its trek south for a time.

Jaheira's warning of how long it might take proved accurate, as they were still traveling as night fell. But with all of them equipped with either natural or item-given Infravision, they trekked on until Jaheira found a spot for them to rest. When morning came, after the group got a good eight hours of sleep, Harry noticed that some of the land features around them looked a little familiar. "We came this way, didn't we? After running into the ankheg?"

"Somewhat, yes," Jaheira answered from where she had been munching happily on bread that Harry had prepared for their patrol, always keeping a good portion of it in his Complex Item Box. She held up her arm, pointing slightly more eastward. "I believe we came from that direction." She hummed pensively, then moved her fingers slightly, closing her eyes as she did so, leaning back against the tree behind her. Harry and the others watched intently, and then that finger shifted again, pointing further south. "And I believe it is in that direction from which the feeling I have been receiving from the forest is coming."

"Paralleling the road, just like I thought," Harry murmured. "How much do you want to bet that they're going to break off towards the road at some point? They can't be making good time in winter like this."

A small band like theirs, fully equipped for winter, with winter boots, clothing, and so forth, could make okay time. But even they needed to go around large snowdrifts, be wary of stepping on snow that wasn't strong enough to take their weight or slip on ice and break something important. Even with the snowshoes, Harry had lost his footing several times, and he knew at this point that he was the one slowing the group down. Jaheira and Khalid had far better footing than he did, while Minsc and Dynaheir, unlike during the autumn, seemed to be handling the winter weather with aplomb. Even if Dynaheir didn't seem to enjoy it much, she could move just as fast as Minsc, and seemed as at home in winter conditions.

That brought up a question to Khalid's mind now as he reflected on that point. "B, b, by the way, Dynaheir, I have been m, m, meaning to ask this question of you s, s, since we rescued you, but it never seemed p, p, polite to bring it up before."

"You're going to ask me about my coloration, I'm sure?" The dusky-hued woman said with a snort. "Everyone seems to eventually. But there is no great mystery. My mother had me out of wedlock with a man from the South. From him, I got my unique coloration. It drew no end of attention when I was younger, but since, I have learned to live with it."

The group began to trick again through the snow until after midday, Minsc and Jaheira, moving ahead of the group, enlarged the map to the point where red dots began to appear. Jaheira paused there while Minsc turned back, heading back towards the group. Harry though, saw that the red dots were moving, and a second later, Jaheira also began to fall back towards

them, although not in a straight line. Instead, he could tell that she was keeping in contact with the enemy as they moved north a bit, then headed west.

He relayed this to the others, pressing on all the harder through the snowy terrain to meet up with Minsc. This caused him no end of issues, but Dynaheir was able to keep him going while Khalid kept an eye out for anyone else using Hide-in-Shadows or other camouflage abilities.

Soon, Minsc was back with them, informing them of what he and Jaheira had seen. "Hobgoblins. Around twenty-eight of them, moving in a group."

"Twenty-eight?" Harry asked, somewhat surprised. If they were xvarts or kobolds moving in such a large group would be normal. But in this kind of terrain, in this kind of weather? That large a number of hobgoblins would probably be having trouble, not only in moving, but in finding enough food to go around.

"Yes, friend Harry. There was some evidence in the woods that several smaller bands had just come together into that larger group, but..." Minsc shrugged. "If they stay together now and move forward as one, I cannot tell you. Nor can Boo, for all that he is a most observant giant miniature space hamster."

"And Jaheira is still out there?" When he nodded, Harry nodded back, then pointed out that the group was moving, and had continued to do so after man's could lift Jaheira behind. "Let's see if we can cut off their course and meet up with Jaheira. We might be able to take that larger group out, but it would be a lot chancier than I would like without the others with us."

Everyone there nodded, and the group shifted to an almost straight westward course through the woods. True to Harry's prediction earlier that day, the horde of hobgoblins made for the road and quickly reached it, while Harry and the others linked up with Jaheira, pulling back and away as she told them what she'd observed as she followed the group of hobgoblins.

"They're not well-equipped. Mostly short swords, short bows, simple leather Jerkins, not even any fire arrows. There's no heavier armor among them from what I could tell. There are also bands of mercenaries, small ones," Jaheira explained. "I did not see any sign denoting them belonging to the Chill, the mercenary group we've had run-ins with before under the employ of the Iron Throne. In fact, I saw distinct markings of at least two or three groups."

Harry stared at Jaheira, then looked over at Khalid, one eyebrow rising. "Does she always lead up to the really bad news like this? I can tell that she's got more to say."

"I, it's a sign that she likes you. With p, p, people she is friends with, Jaheira does indeed l, l, like to lead an individual on with little tidbits until r, r, revealing the worst news. She f, f, feels it prepares the listener for it. If y, y, you were not her friend, she would simply b, b, blurt it out

and watch your r, r, reaction.” Khalid said with a laugh, as Jaheira muttered curses under her breath at Harry’s observation skill.

Actually, Harry hadn’t gotten any kind of observation notice from that. He had simply grown to know Jaheira well enough by this point even his AAS didn’t need to bother with that kind of thing, unlike when he won friendship points with Jaheira or when it wanted to make a snarky comment at Jaheira’s expense. “Give, Jaheira.”

“... I was able to get close enough to hear them talking. These hobgoblins are on a job. A big one. Two thousand gold for every survivor of a battle to come... as long as the Soul Taker Dagger is brought south to their employer. How their employers know of its emergence from its hiding place, I do not know, but the hobgoblins were tossing around the term Soul Taker Dagger often enough it is certain that they the Dagger is their target.”

At those words, Harry got a notification.

The quest, Protect the Soul Taker Dagger (medium) has been updated.

Somehow word of your find has spread to the darkest of ears. They (whoever they are) want the Soul Taker Dagger, the dagger containing the soul of a Greater Fiend. These vile individuals have sent a small army to get it, no matter what they have to do to see it done. Whether or not they mean to release the creature, or simply to use the dagger in some nefarious way does not matter. As per your agreement with the Harpers you must protect the dagger until such time as the Harpers can take official possession of it.

The reward for this task has increased: Your reputation with the Harper’s will become exemplary, and further resources will be available to you going forward.

Warning: as this quest might collide with the existing quest and oath fulfilled, specific rewards are not calculable at this time beyond the goodwill of the Harpers.

“Well, that’s... Interesting. And the quest specifically says that ‘they’ have sent an army? Twenty-eight hobgoblins aren’t an army,” Dynaheir questioned.

“Twenty-eight hobgoblins wouldn’t be enough to have given me the feeling I got when we began to push into the Wood of Sharp Teeth,” Jaheira answered with a scowl as she and Khalid exchanged glances, worry filling them at the idea of that cursed item being taken from their protection. “This is almost certainly just one band of many.”

Here, Harry was faced with a difficult choice. He could retreat to Beregost now, fort up, and prepare for trouble there. Harry and his companions could take out this band and then trust Jaheira’s druid abilities to search for others. That meant he might be out of position when another group hit the town, assuming that the Soul Taker dagger was there rather than in

Harry's Complex Item Box. *And while I know that Kelddath at least is really high-leveled, Vai and the rest of her guards aren't, even with the caravan guards added to their number. And I doubt Thalantyr would stir himself if they could bypass the High Hedge.*

"But you have no way of telling me where any other group is, right?" he asked aloud, hoping to get more information.

"Now that this group is mainly on the road, my forest senses wouldn't even be able to tell me about them. The others are too distant from me currently. I might be able to pick out a vague direction, but that is all," Jaheira affirmed. "And that doesn't consider there might be other forces coming from the west, which I would have no ability to track."

"But you were able to feel the overall wariness of the woods when we first started to find this group. Which means there might be other groups already near the town by this point." Harry guessed, to which Jaheira nodded.

All the others looked at Harry, waiting for his decision. Even Dynaheir and Minsc, usually among the first to say they needed to take action, to strike at what they saw as evil, and in this case, it truly was evil, remain quiet, waiting on Harry's words.

"Khalid, Jaheira, you two are the ones with the best eye for terrain. If we take the road, how long will it take us to get back to Beregost under these conditions? And do you remember if there's a place ahead of this group where we can ambush them? I can't."

Khalid and Jaheira looked at one another, talking quietly in Elvish for a few moments, Khalid's distinctive stutter even more noticeable in that language than in common before Jaheira spoke up for them both. "There may be a place further north of here, but we would need to hurry to get into position before the hobgoblins reach there if they can move at any speed once on the road, anyway. There is a series of large rocks on one side of the road. We camped there with Garrick the first afternoon out of Beregost. We could set up ourselves easily enough especially in this kind of weather.

"As for time to get back to Beregost..." Jaheira frowned in thought. "It would be faster than coming out the way we did. But that does not mean it will be easy. The road isn't kept clear during the winter, Harry. We'll run into some of the same problems following it as we do here, only we won't need to worry so much about snow being dumped on us from trees or attacks from animals."

"I think we need to take a chance here. Let's skirt around this group, get ahead of them, get to the road, and then head to this ambush point and wait for them there. If we make good enough time, Minsc, I'll want you to run back to the town and take a message to Vai and the

others. We might be able to take on this group on our own, but it would be better to get some people out here to help us and to prepare the town for trouble.”

Jaheira nodded and she and Minsc led the way off through the woods, skirting north around the group of hobgoblins mercenaries. They kept close enough to the hobgoblins to keep a few of their red dots at the southernmost edge of Harry’s as they went. As evening fell, they came upon the road and instantly began to move northward along it, leaving the red dots behind.

OOOOOOO

Half a day later, the group of them came to the site of the ambush point Jaheira had spoken of. Well within bow range was a series of large boulders, currently capped with snow, with a good firing line between them and the road. The area between the road and there was a series of heavy snow drifts, including right up against the boulders. In comparison, the road was pretty flat, the snow on it quite deep, but hard packed mostly. The group had been making decent time thanks to Minsc and the others being so experienced and the snow shoes.

“Alright, I think this is good. Jaheira, scout around for a place to make a camp on the other side of those boulders. Khalid, figure out a way for us to get up onto those boulders without leaving too much in the way of clues. Dynaheir, you and I are going to take a page out of Imoen’s book and make up some traps. I know we won’t be able to make official ones, but setting up some trees to fall on the road should be doable,” Harry ordered. “Minsc, I’d like you to stay, but I also want to get the warning to Vai and some help if we can.”

With a final farewell to his witch and a warning injunction to Harry to watch over her, Minsc raced off. Unburdened by Harry’s slow slogging progress through the snow, the Rashemani Ranger was quite fleet of foot for someone so large in such terrain, and within an hour, he was out of sight on Harry’s map, heading further north along the road.

With some difficulty, Dynaheir and Harry figured out what they wanted to do, and as Harry cut into the base of the tree facing away from the road, Dynaheir tied the two trees to a few more. With the aid of two summoned ogres, she bent the tree ever so slightly out away from the road with those ropes. Once it was nearly cut all the way through, the ropes became the only thing holding the tree up. Once the rope was cut, the tree would instantly start to fall onto the road.

Meanwhile, Khalid and Jaheira, who had found a good place for a camp rather quickly, created several foxholes in among the snow on top of the large boulders that Khalid had decided were a good place to launch an ambush from. Thinking about it as they all came together, Harry then prepared a well-hidden trench nearest the road between it and the

boulders. He and Minsc, if he returned in time, could hide out there, ready to engage in hand-to-hand combat when the mercenaries tried to charge the ambushers.

All this work took them the better part of the day, but as evening fell and they pulled back away from the ambush point to make camp, Harry was surprised by a notification.

Congratulations!

Building upon your past actions and your Greater Observation skill, your use of terrain and the desire to create an ambush point has opened up a new area of knowledge under the **War** branch of your **Leadership** skill.

Master Ambusher: You have begun to develop an eye for terrain to the point where it has developed into a buff for you and your companions whenever you have time to set the battlefield in your favor in order to ambush your enemy. Currently, this is simply a +2 to Defense and Offense, but it will go up as you level up your Leadership Skill.

Using Tactics in conjunction with your Master Ambusher skill will multiply the effects of those Tactics.

Changing the terrain to your advantage, be it by shifting boulders, felling trees or even just shifting a piece of furniture around, will now be done faster and more efficiently outside of combat. The odds of the enemy spotting your ambush, once your party members are in hiding, drop by half.

This is a passive skill. Unlike the bonuses, the odds of your ambush being spotted can only go up through your own actions while setting it up. Further, this is a skill that only affects a prepared battlefield prior to contact with the enemy.

This skill will only level up as your Leadership Skill does. Unlike Tactics, you will not earn experience specific to this Skill.

That was quite nice, but it didn't carry over to creating a camp, which took the better part of the rest of that night. When they were done, though, thanks to Dynaheir's careful spells and Jaheira and Khalid's planning, they were able to create a three-sided igloo essentially, buried in the snow of the forest on the west side of the road,

Crawling into the igloo, hidden under a few fallen trees, all of them needed some rest after the day's exertions. Even Harry, with his greater endurance, wanted some rest. With that, he made the decision to let them all rest rather than have someone on guard. He didn't even bother with cooking. Working with the axe and shoveling so much snow had taken it out of him almost as much as it did the others.

With his AAS alarm, they were woken up halfway through the night as a group of kobolds tried to attack them. Seven of them.

Dealing with them was more of an irritant than anything else, and soon the group was back asleep, the bodies of the kobolds carried away by Harry deeper into the woods. The next day, when he went back there to bury the bodies, he found that all of them were gone, dragged further away by something else. And since it was already starting to snow again, that was enough.

The second day at the ambush site was spent better preparing their ambush point, as well as making the camp more hidden, to the point where they were able to actually have a warm meal for once, the first one they'd had since setting out from Beregost. All of the others were fulsome in their praise for Harry's cooking that night, to the point where he was actually flushing a little, a sight that caused Khalid to laugh.

Their good mood lasted until early the next day, when Harry spotted a green dot with Minsc's name under it moving through his map again. It was followed by several blue dots, not the green of the rest of the party.

He looked at the others in confusion as he reported this, wondering what it meant. However, Jaheira and Khalid, by far the most experienced of the party, had an answer, which Jaheira put forth as Khalid sighed, shaking his head. "R, r, recall, Harry, that we all a, a, are still working u, u, under a cloud of suspicion when it c, c, comes to Vai. While she might be w, w, willing to take Minsc's word about t, t, the hobgoblin force coming north, she m, m, might not be willing to release the rest of our b, b, band to come and join us here, b, b, believing it to be a trick."

Harry scowled, shaking his head. "She really thinks I would become a fallen paladin like that? She knows about my quest, An Oath Fulfilled. Doesn't she?" Honestly, Harry couldn't actually remember if they'd talked about it during that whole debacle. *But surely she should know that after a paladin gives his word, he has to keep it, right?*

"She knows you travel with Viconia." Dynaheir said, giving the word 'travel' added emphasis as she looked at Harry, one eyebrow rising in wintry interrogation. "That is enough for such as Vai. Indeed, it would be enough for most people. And by the way, how exactly has that been progressing? You and she both sleep in the kitchen these days. Is sleep all you do? I'd hate to think you were carrying on in the same place you prepared our meals."

"I don't see where that's any business of yours, but at this point, yes. It is. The chill of the day tends to put a damper on more than simply cuddling."

“Viconia cuddles?” Was the startled statement coming from all three of Harry’s current companions, the shouts from Jaheira and Dynaheir overriding Khalid’s habitual stutter.

Harry chuckled dryly. That **had** come as something of a surprise to both him and Viconia alike.

Not that Harry greatly enjoyed that kind of thing, but that Viconia didn’t seem to be against it. More bemused by it, really. It seemed as if the concept of simply sleeping next to someone, taking comfort from their touch rather than feeling lust from it, was entirely beyond her understanding. She did seem to enjoy it, or else she wouldn’t continue to sleep beside Harry, but even after a few weeks of doing so, Viconia still seemed to be bemused by the whole thing, even weeks after they had begun to sleep together. As if Viconia was waiting for the novelty of it to wear off and for Harry’s desire for physical closeness to become annoying.

“For now, though, I think I should prepare some food for Minsc when he arrives. If you three could go out and wait for him on the road? We don’t want the hobgoblins to see any trails in the snow after all.”

Since it had snowed twice since they’d arrived at the ambush point, that wasn’t exactly a big deal. Yet Jaheira had estimated that they might see evidence of the goblins on Harry’s map later that day, so everyone agreed it was better to be safe than sorry.

Minsc wasn’t the only one who was happy with a warm meal by the time Dynaheir, Khalid, and Jaheira led him and his companions off the road and around to the hidden campsite. With the amount of work they put into it, it was so well hidden the guards couldn’t see it until they were right in front of the tunnel leading inside. The interior was also quite nice, set under the eaves and around the trunks of several trees, with a small hole in the side out of which the smoke from the cook fire wafted out over the ground rather than up into the air.

Harry looked at the three guards with Minsc, then over at Minsc as they all entered behind his other companions. “Explanations first, then food,” he intoned firmly.

It turned out that Jaheira had been quite correct. Vai did not want to send the rest of his party out to join him, concerned that this might be some kind of trick. Worse, though, was the fact that that wasn’t all of her thinking. One of her patrols that had gone out to check on Thalantr had not come back. In the winter, that trek would take the better part of two days, but they should have been back in at most five or six, assuming they would stop in with the conjurer for a day or more, as was normal during the winter.

While Thalantr was normally quite standoffish, that didn’t mean he wasn’t entirely antisocial, especially when it came to the townsfolk. He would put them up for a day, then send

them off until they came back in the next month to check on him again. More importantly to him, the guards would drop off meat, cheese and food from the town.

Because of that and Harry's warning, Vai had decided that she wanted the rest of his party, which represented a decent chunk of the combat potential of the town, to remain with the town itself. "But she has also asked Lord Kelddath and his folk to join in scouting out away from the town. And your party members are part of that," one of the guards explained. He'd given his name, but honestly, Harry didn't care enough to remember it.

"So she is taking the warning seriously but still doesn't trust me. Fine. I can deal with that," Harry murmured as he finished handing out bowls of hot venison stew to the guards. They read as

Flaming Fist Guard.

Another type of humanoid, or specifically human in this case, type of warrior who is not an adventurer. While not able to stand up against an Adventurer one-on-one, Flaming Fists come in packs like wolves.

Organized, well-equipped, and sometimes even well led, these are the soldiers of Baldur's Gate, its principal army, police force, and investigation team all in one.

These three are particularly well-armed with both sword, shield and longbows.

Frankly, at this point Harry knew that the regular Flaming Fist troopers in Bereghost weren't worth all that much in a fight. Maybe equal to two bandits or so? Still, they were all armed with bows, which was good. "Will you three be willing to follow my orders in a fight?" Harry asked bluntly.

The three of them looked at one another and then nodded. "You adventurers are probably more experienced in battles like this than we are, and there's more of you," one of them opined. "We'll follow your lead."

"Good. In that case, after you've eaten, we'll take you out to the ambush site. You'll join Dynaheir, Jaheira and Khalid in the back row. Minsc and I will be in the front."

The enlarged ambush party had time to go over the details of the battle, the number of hobgoblins that Jaheira and Minsc had seen, and even have one more good hot meal before the hobgoblins first began to appear on Harry's map. He didn't tell the guards this, simply having most of them hide out in the camp, with Minsc, Dynaheir, and Harry himself out on the trail.

As time went by, Harry realized more than twenty-eight red dots were coming their way. There looked to be at least thirty-five more hobgoblins having joined the groups they'd seen

first. Regardless, they were all coming down the road, not spreading out into the woods except in small teams of two occasionally as he watched them come. *Probably foraging. I doubt they'll stay away for long enough to matter.*

He looked over at Khalid. "Tell me the instant you can hear them in the distance. We'll want the guards and the rest of our band up here with us long before they get here."

Khalid nodded, but it was another hour or more before he reported that he could finally hear something in the distance, thanks to how slowly the hobgoblins were moving, even on the road, thanks to how much snow there was. When he did, Harry moved off to get the others.

By the time the first of the hobgoblins actually came within sight of the ambushers, it was evening, and the sun was starting to set. Still, they came on, and Harry glanced over his shoulder from his snow trench towards the rocks behind him, keeping his head below the lip of the snow. It would be up to Khalid, the best shot among them, to start the battle.

Soon, the front of the column, although calling it that was a bit of a misnomer, was parallel with the ambush point. Then the frontmost hobgoblins passed, and Harry waited a bit longer. A few minutes later, he heard the sound of something going '**thunk**' in the distance. That was the sound of an arrow hitting a specific piece of wood, specifically, a piece of wood underneath a rope. Thereby cutting the rope and releasing the tension on the tree, Harry and Dynaheir had worked so hard to prepare.

A second later, there was a loud groaning, and the tree collapsed, slamming down onto the road and, if the screams were accurate, some hobgoblins.

At the same time, arrows whistled from on high, striking some of the got hobgoblins, two of which went down. Tangling vines roared up from the ground thanks to Jaheira, the vines bursting up out of the snow. The magical growth didn't seem to care about the weather at all as it worked to entangle the hobgoblins. A moment later, Magic Missiles lashed out, lighting the evening with pink light as they crashed into their target, killing the hobgoblin with ease.

Harry and Minsc rose from their own hiding places, and Harry hurled a throwing axe into a goblin by the side of the road, the axe burying itself in the hobgoblin's shoulder. Minsc's arrow took another through the side of the throat as more arrows began to fall among the hobgoblins. Two of them were Fire arrows, not the regular kind, which only carried some magic that infused them with burning damage, but rather the sort used as signal flares. They hit their targets and remained burning, lighting up the evening further.

Right, the guards don't have Infravision like my band, Harry thought, even as he hurled another axe forward. He missed his initial target but hit another with enough force to cause a cry of pain.

Seven of the hobgoblins were down before the rest realized they were being attacked from the side and charged out toward the ambushers, some of them losing their footing instantly as they moved away from the trail into the forest, where the depth of the snow was far more treacherous to figure out than on the road. Still more charged through towards the ambushers, and Harry and Minsc stepped up from where they had been firing over the lip of their trenches. Stepping up onto a prepared footstool at the front of the trench, they raised their weapons, ready and eager. In Harry's case, that was the bec de corbin. In Minsc's, it meant the Chelsea Crusher. Both weapons gave them an advantage in reach, especially against enemies like the hobgoblins armed with short swords and very little in the way of shields.

Behind them, Dynaheir began to launch more spells, two Fire Arrows and a Smog. Khalid and the guards rained fire as fast as they could, and Jaheira concentrated on summoning animals into being. Seconds later, the howls of wolves joined the fight, and three wolves raced down to engage the front edge of the hobgoblin force as they crashed into Harry and Minsc's defensive position.

For several moments, it was pure pandemonium as the sun continued to fall. Minsc and Harry stacked up the bodies ahead of them, with none of the hobgoblins either thinking about or able to move around them to try and flank them.

Twice more, Jaheira launched Tangling Vines into the group of hobgoblins, nailing most of the group in place as more than half of the remaining hobgoblins started to turn yellow one after another, turning to flee. But none of the attackers were in the mood to let them go.

Seeing this and knowing the battle was going their way, Harry turned his thoughts to the bigger picture and hissed as a thought occurred to him. With that, he bellowed a command, his voice a bellow barely heard over the clamor of battle. "I want one of them alive! Jaheira, Khalid! You're the ones with the best eyesight. Find someone with the markings of an officer among them. We need one of them alive to get some more information out of!"

Moments later, Harry glanced to one side as motion caught his eyes before Khalid was passed the two foxholes that he and Minsc were in, charging down into a small cluster of enemies that still remained. There were only nine of the hobgoblins left by this point, and only two of them showed red on Harry's map. The others were trying to flee but couldn't, thanks to the Tangling Vines. Seeing Khalid charging forward, Harry barked an order to Minsc, who replaced the Chelsea crusher with his Claymore, charging out with Harry, who in turn replaced the bec with his longsword and tower shield.

They cut through three hobgoblins and then found Khalid standing over the unconscious body of another. The ground was littered with the bodies of two more. The trio remained there on guard as the last of the hobgoblins were felled by the wolves.

Jaheira soon joined them, patting one of the wolves companionably on his shoulder. The beast didn't look up, munching on the body of the hobgoblin. "This battle will bring wolves from hundreds of miles around Harry, and all of them will feast well going forward for days," she said with a faint smile.

"Well, I'm glad we provided a meal for your furry companions. Although considering that this might be just a prelude to more, I am a little concerned about the overall implications," Harry drawled, looking down at the prisoner. Seeing the hobgoblin begin to stir from the knock on the head that Khalid had laid him out with, Harry squatted in front of him. "Nice work, Khalid."

"I, i, i, it was nothing," Khalid said modestly before smiling slightly. "A very well-p, p, planned ambush, oh glorious I, I, leader."

His wife chortled at that, that line has been one she had occasionally used sarcastically when it came to Harry. It had been quite a long time since she had done so, though, Harry having earned her friendship and respect. Behind them, Dynaheir and the guards made their way through the woods, carefully making certain that none of the hobgoblins that had been knocked into the snow here and there but had not actually been killed just yet would ever be able to pull themselves back out.

Soon, all of them, the guards included, were surrounding the prisoner, who stared up at Harry and then around at the others in horror and fear. "Now, you have one chance before you become wolf meat like the rest of these people. We know what you're after. We know what you've been paid. Now, we want to know how many of you there are or at least how many bands. Do you have any idea or information? Think very carefully, friend," Harry said softly, as, without any prompting, one of the wolves that Jaheira had summoned growled menacingly from behind the druid. "Or else the next few moments are going to be very painful for you."

End Chapter

Okay, so as mentioned before, this chapter was supposed to cover the actual attack on Beregost. However, I decided that I wanted to get most of the grinding work out of the way, but was time for some romance, and, frankly, the battle to come can be used to show more of Viconia, Alora, Edwina and Imoen when Harry isn't around. I want to show more about how they think and fight (and get into the spell side of things more) and I want to hint at the greater conflict between good and evil beyond the original Sons of Bhaal plot point. I also want to bring the whole Beregost off to a climactic conclusion, AND push Harry to finally make a choice as to which god he should look toward (the most, anyway).

Regardless, I hope you all enjoyed this, and look forward to a lot of ROFL stomping prior to real danger, and what is going on with Imoen and the temple of Lathander? Until next time, guys and girls!