

A note: Every time I try to text back into the word doc after going over a segment with Grammarly a lot of the necessary font/paragraph stuff changes or is messed up. So there will be noticeable changes in terms of Grammar, word choice and other small mistakes from the online version to this one.

Despite that, this has been checked over by *justlovereadin'* in record time. Everyone send him thanks for his efforts, since he did point out one big issue I needed to correct before posting this story, along with several hundred smaller mistakes.

Chapter 6: Dungeon Dogs

You have slept in the gnoll of the Elder Dryad. You have slept for eight hours. All spells have been memorized, and health points restored in relation to Class.

This was the message that greeted Harry as he woke up for the day, his mind and body fully awake the instant the message popped into being, as he had gotten used to. What also greeted him was the face of the dryad looking down at him. From only a few inches away in fact. He tried not to flinch and instead smiled somewhat wanly up at her. "Erm, good morning, Miss?"

"It is indeed morning. You wake up quite quickly don't you?" the dryad asked, cocking her head to one side.

"So do you," Imoen interject from nearby, looking at her quizzically then over to her tree and the other side of it, where last night's goings on had occurred. Imoen of course had also seen the same message as Harry, something that both Minsc and Khalid had seen as well. "Although I'll note that our two other male companions aren't waking up just yet. Tire them out did you?"

"Alas yes." The dryad sighed, a wicked twinkle in her eyes. "I had hoped for more."

"Really?" Imoen leaned forward, the wicked twinkle transferring to her own eyes now, accompanied by a smirk. "So Edwin's boasts were just that?"

"Not entirely. His loquaciousness was only the first aspect of his lingual skills I put to the test, but when it came to the main event, neither he nor the other one quite measured up. Neither in stamina, nor in actual measurement."

"Perhaps you need to make a sign," Imoen said with a laugh. "You only get to play if you're so tall?"

"If only the height of a male's body was commensurate to the..."

"There's a man right here you know," Harry muttered, pushing himself to his feet and shaking his head. "If you to are going to have girl talk, couldn't you at least wait until the guy in the area has left said area?"

"Why ever would we do that?" both the seemingly middle-aged dryad and Imoen asked as one, then shared a laugh at his face.

"My vengeance will be swift and final," Harry growled, before he moved past them.

He found Jaheira and Khalid already awake. Khalid was busily cooking something over a very small very well controlled fire, well away from any of the trees on the other side of the small lake that fed the dryad's growth. Jaheira was sitting in the lotus position next to him, wringing water from her hair, as her eyes moved over to her armor and staff laid out in front of them.

They both nodded to Harry, who nodded back, before pushing Khalid away from the cooking fire. "I thought we agreed that I would handle the cooking?"

"You hadn't woken up yet," Khalid said with a chuckle, "and it's not as if burning meat is so hard."

"Burning meat is fine, burning it with style, i.e. the ability to actually make it edible, is something else entirely," Harry retorted

This caused Jaheira to chuckle. "You're going to spoil us you know."

"Well you did call me your omni-present authority figure, and as the so-appointed leader of this group, I suppose it is my job to spoil you all whenever I can." The smell of the food soon roused the last three of their party. Minsc came out of the woods nearby, smiling grandly up at the sun for a moment before turning to his friends his loud voice Booming out. "It is a great day for butt-kicking for goodness! Today, today we will rescue my Witch and put those vile ones who so trapped her into the ground! Truly Boo, it is a day on which the sun could not possibly shine enough!"

This was accompanied by a squeak from his shoulder, and the dryad, who had come up with Imoen stared at the little creature. "Ah, I saw this one last night did I not? He's quite cute," she murmured, reaching over with a finger. Minsc might have tried to defend his giant miniature space hamster companion, but the dryad was a little too quick.

One finger caressed down Boo's back, causing it to chitter in delight before the large Barbarian Ranger twitched aside muttering about how the pretty lady "should not spoil the mighty eye-seeking warrior that is Boo!"

"Foods up," Harry said, gathering everyone's attention. Two fish had been roasted filleted, with at least two slices for every person there to go with various greens made into a

morning salad, heavy on the fruit donated from the dryad elder. There was even a roasted potato, cut into thin slices and cooked in a bit of vegetable oil with salt and pepper.

“Truly, your food is one of many reasons why Minsc knows that he and Boo have found true boon companions,” the large man exulted, grabbing his portion, and eating ravenously.

Edwin sneered at the fare for a moment, but the sneer went away as he ate, while Garrick kept silent, his eyes twitching towards the dryad then away, something in his face signifying that he wasn't certain what to think about last night. Which was fine enough for Harry's perspective given Harry wasn't certain he would know what to think of it either.

All Harry was certain of was that he was glad to have dodged that particular issue. The Elder Dryad was attractive, immensely so despite appearing as a middle-aged woman, but she was not really Harry's type, and he was sort of afraid that he would not have measured up to her expectations either. The gleam in Imoen's eyes still promised trouble for Garrick at the very least if not both him and Edwin, and Harry wanted no part of that either, asking the dryad if she knew how long it would take them to get to the gnoll fortress.

“If you travel for a full morning as fast as humans are able to go, without truly tiring themselves out you will arrive at your destination. It will be a vast fortress, separated from this coastline by a single bridge,” the dryad explained. “What guards the bridge, or what awaits you within, I cannot tell you. But know that my grove is open for you on your return trip.”

“Even if we bring one more woman with us?” Jaheira asked quickly. Often times dryads were very fickle about how many people, not only the type of individual, they led into their groves. Another woman might especially cause issues.

“Child, I was old when that fortress was first built, I am well past such petty jealousies as consume those dryad's of younger trees,” The matronly dryad laughed setting her large chest to bounce, a sight that caused even the married Khalid to stare, while Harry closed his eyes, concentrating on his food.

Willpower check past. +100 reputation/Trust/Respect points for every woman around you.
Even the Elder Dryad. Many women like men who will play hard to get.

When he looked up, Harry found the dryad's eyes on him, her tongue flicking out across her lips. “Besides, she doesn't seem to be involved with any of these men judging from what little you mentioned of her. So she would not be competition for the unattached men in your party. And I would dearly love a repeat performance... perhaps with a third actor on the stage?”

Harry twitched, but made no reply. There was really nothing safe he could say to that one.

Ding Common sense, it can even help you with that odd creature called the female of the species. Just not often.

+ 1 to Wisdom.

Soon enough the meal was finished, and after Edwin confirmed that his late night debauchery's had not stopped him from memorising his spells for the day, the dryad loaded them down with the promised provisions. The majority of these provisions consisted of more than one hundred tiny red berries, which Harry's gamer skill identified.

Healing berries +1 X 175

These healing berries were created by the mother dryad and are a sign of her favor to those she gives them to.

Consume them and you will receive +2 health for every berry consumed. Tastes like an odd mix of cherry and lychee.

Thinking about it, Harry had the berries divided, giving fifteen to Edwin, Jaheira, and Garrick, and then splitting up the others evenly to the rest including Imoen, who wasn't a frontline combatant. Jaheira looked at him quizzically at that, but before she could ask the question, Harry forestalled her. "I know Imoen isn't a frontline combatant, and I'm not going to ask her to be, but what she is, is one of our scouts, along with Minsc and you. But your ability can't be used in a fortress or settlement right?"

Jaheira nodded and Harry gestured to Minsc. "And even Minsc might lose his ability to Hide in Shadows once we're in the fortress. So Imoen might become our only scout. She'll be operating on her own, and I want her to be able to get out of trouble if she runs into it."

Bing You have taken a step on the road to understanding the difference between tactics and strategy.

While small as you do not yet have the ability to truly make strategic decisions/plans, these steps will add up eventually.

While Harry pondered on that message, Jaheira nodded, as that made sense. She was quite impressed by Harry's ability to think ahead when given the time, and his tactical skills were growing as she and her husband continued to travel with him. *I wonder, is that because of a natural affinity for leadership? Or simply a byproduct of his Leadership ability?*

Regardless, she was eager to see where their partnership with him went. Indeed, Harry had already proven to be a godsend, discovering what could eventually become a clue leading to Jaheira and Khalid regaining their true strength.

The elder dryad also gave them other fruits, all of which Harry's skill identified easily one after another, as they were handed to him in one large mass.

Gourd of power X 5.

Like the healing fruit, this adds +1 to strength for a given amount of time once consumed.

Banana of Dexterity X 2.

A rare viand only made by dryads, this fruit can give + 2 to Dexterity for a given amount of time once consumed

Grapes of Insight X 1.

A very rare viand made exclusively by Elder Dryads, this fruit can give +2 to Intelligence and Wisdom for a given amount of time once consumed

Warning, the effects of these fruits do not stack.

Harry had to think for a moment to wonder about what 'does not stack' meant. but he supposed that it meant you couldn't just eat several of each type and build up the stat like that. Still, Harry was pleased with their gifts, especially the two bananas of dexterity which he immediately handed over to Imoen. "Just in case we find any traps or locks we need breaking," he quipped. The power fruits he passed around to himself, Minsc, Khalid, Garrick and Imoen, one each.

Through all this, Edwin was staring at Harry, then over at Imoen thoughtfully, interested in their use of the Item Box. "Your Item Box is that well organized that you are able to get out what you wish at any one time? Fascinating, and well beyond what I would expect of normal chest-beating, weapon waving simians such as yourselves."

Harry shrugged his shoulders nodded his head, and said that it was one of his abilities, not going into any date detail. Still, that was enough, and Edwin kept on looking at them thoughtfully. Harry of course notice this and muttered to Imoen to, "Can you tease him or something about last night to distract him. Edwin is far too smart for me to want him to be thinking about even just how we use our Item Boxes."

"You got it boss," Imoen said with a wink, and shifted around the group to do just that. Within minutes of her verbal assault, she had Edwin nearly biting his goatee in anger while Garrick stammered and blushed and looked away, continuing his unusual silence.

"That was well thought of if rather cruel," Jaheira said as she moved to take the lead as they walked down the ravine to the plain below.

Harry shrugged, keeping his reply low. "Any port in a storm. Remember, we still aren't certain how far we can trust Garrick, let alone Edwin. If for very different reasons."

"One for his big mouth, one because of his affiliation," Khalid cut in grimly from Harry's other side. "You're right about the reasoning lad, we won't argue about that. With someone like Edwin, it's always smart to be wary of a dagger in your back."

Once they reached the plains, Jaheira and Minsc broke away from the group, heading out ahead of them with Imoen eventually moving to the tail end of the group. They moved through this area quickly, possibly a little faster than the dryad had estimated they would be able to. When they started to hear the sound of the distant shoreline around midday, they stopped to eat, after which the party continued on its way.

Eventually the party arrived in sight of their target and Harry whistled. It was indeed a massive fortress. Not as large as Candlekeep, Harry estimated it was about the fourth of the size, but this thing was built for war, not a built for purpose citadel of learning. Its walls were high rising out of sheer cliff faces, in a series of outward-facing walls and from where he stood, Harry could only see one road leading up to the entrance, one walled portion to the other. The top of the keep seemed square, its sides crenellated. But from this position, Harry couldn't see if they were patrolled or not. There were also several dozen murder holes in the walls of the main keep segment, and what looked like a few side roads leading around the side of the massive rock that stood as the base of the fortress.

Garrick gulped. "Um, far be it from me to advocate caution, but that, um, that looks far too large for a group our size to take on."

"Bah, the greater the challenge, the greater the glory! Right, Boo?" Minsc argued, caressing the head of the miniature giant space hamster as it sat on his shoulder.

"Far be it from me to agree with someone who believes that singing for his meals is a proper trade, but I must admit that even my own puissant spellcraft has limits," Edwin mused. "While my mission is paramount to my continued well-being, dying in it's pursuit would not serve that well-being either."

"We're going to have to take it slow and carefully then," Harry cut in. "I think through careful planning and guile we can do this, we just won't be able to fight them all. Remember these are gnolls, they won't be as organized or quick to rally against an attack as a trained unit of humans, elves or even orcs would. They lack the intelligence to do so."

While Harry and the others were examining their target, Jaheira was staring up at the sky, scowling. "It's going to start raining soon."

"There's not a cloud in the sky," Imoen protested.

But to her surprise, Minsc backed Jaheira up, sniffing the air. "This is the coast little Imoen, and there is a reason why this coast is called the Sword Coast. Storms are frequent, rise out of nowhere, to smash ships against the land. Of course, we are no ship, yet it will not be a pleasant time."

"It won't be that heavy," Jaheira theorized, "but it is going to be quite a lot of rain."

Despite that grim prediction, they were in position to stare down at the bridge leading to the fortress by the time the storm struck. The storm wasn't heavy as Jaheira put it, but the rain was still coming down enough to obscure vision.

It was a thin bridge, made of wood, and there looked to be some rubble on the other side that might have been a guard post or gatehouse, but it had long since fallen apart. The bridge too looked rickety, but somewhat in better repair, a few bits having been replaced by new wood. It also had two large ogrillons guarding it on this end of the span.

"Is it normal for gnolls to be able to work with ogrillons and xvarts? ...Ugh, evil villainous Smurfs," Imoen sighed, shaking her head. "My childhood will never be the same again."

"I have no idea what you just said, and for my sanity I think I'm just going to ignore it," Khalid drawled.

"With Imoen that's often the norm," Harry laughed. "But, she did have a point. "If we're going to face ogrillons and other things in there as well, we should probably think about that now."

"Gnolls are able to work with other subhuman races, but most times they won't bother. In the case of the Xvarts, they'll probably be quite a few of those up there, they are a subservient race to Gnolls, orcs, and all types of ogres, and giants. But gnolls won't make large scale agreement with those races."

"Giants use Xvarts?" Imoen interjected incredulously. "what the heck for?"

"Yes, normally as portable snacks," Khalid chuckled darkly. "They and goblins both. And kobolds. When giants are around, the smallest of the subhuman races make themselves scarce if they have any sense."

"Focus please," Jaheira ordered, her tone somewhat wry. "And Khalid, my husband, once more, don't encourage her."

"Going down that rabbit warren tends to make one lose one's mind eventually," Harry agreed. "Still, you're saying we won't face many ogrillons if any, inside?"

"Exactly. These two will probably have agreed to take on some guard duty work in return for weapons craft or food and other supplies. That will be the extent of it."

"Regardless," Edwin said, butting into the conversation with a scowl, "if we are supposed to, to retrieve the Witch within, then we needs must get past the over-evolved dirt mounds below."

"He's right," Harry replied, making no indication that he, and the others judging by their narrow eyed looks had noticed that Edwin had replaced the word 'retrieve' for something else.

It was no secret to any of them why Edwin had agreed to join them and that was part of the reason why they didn't trust him further than Imoen could throw him.

"Minsc, Imoen do you think you can get into a position behind them without one of them spotting you?" Harry asked, staring at the two ogrillons as he read off the information his bestiary was giving Harry of this new kind of monster.

Ogrillons.

The shorter, uglier version of Orges, or perhaps the larger, uglier version of orcs depending on who you talk to. They are smelly, stupid the majority of them anyway, prone to fits of violence, and all of them have immense strength even for their size. Not a communal species, they generally stay to themselves or to small groups of their fellows. Apparently being the son of an ogre and orc pairing isn't good for getting dates.

Attitude towards Adventurers: neutral/varies. Ogrillons can be civilized occasionally, to a certain extent, and some of them take up adventuring themselves, but they are in the tiny, tiny minority. The .0001 percentile in point of fact. The rest are more open to being bribed than most monsters. But they also might just try to eat you anyway.

Weaknesses: ogrillons have no added immunity to magic or element-type damage, but neither are they particularly susceptible to any.

Then he looked up at his map, and blinked confused for a moment. He hadn't noticed before but there were two odd things going on with it at the moment. One, it wasn't showing any red dots in the portion of the fortress that was within his range. That was very strange, but he supposed that the gnolls could be inside the castle and thus out of his range as he had seen before. But he also noticed that the two ogrillons were not glowing the red of enemies, rather the blue of neutrality.

"Minsc does not believe so," Minsc said. "I tested my stalking skills just a second ago, and alas, Minsc was still there when he looked down at his own mighty frame. A pity that, it always amuses Minsc to see little Boo hiding away on his person before he too disappears. There is so much of Minsc that Boos often becomes confused as to where he should hide."

"Too much information there big guy." Still thinking, Harry stared at the bridge. "What about you Imoen?"

"Yeah I can do it," a voice said in his ear, causing him to twitch.

He turned slightly to glare at the purple-haired girl so she could see him rolling his eyes. "Show off. Right, get behind them, and prepare to Backstab."

"Both of them at once?" Imoen asked, now looking a little worried.

"I'll leave the decision of which want to target up to you. But if the rest of you could wait here and prepare suitable long ranged gifts for them we'll be right back."

"Wait, what?" Jaheira blinked while the others also looked confused.

Harry ignored her and wondered idly what reaction that would give him in their trust and respect range before he saw the results.

You have lost -10 respect from Jaheira.

No woman likes to be ignored, even for a moment. Especially if they're a bitch in the first place.

I see that this Advanced Adventurer Skill of mine still doesn't like Jaheira all that much. I wonder why considering I don't mind her all that much now since she's calmed her baps down about being the more senior adventurers and all that 'child' stuff.

Putting those thoughts aside, Harry pulled his hood over his face further, and began to slouch, actually dragging one foot.

To the ogrillons he looked like a wandering, down on his luck lone adventurer now, which was precisely look he was going for. "What do we have here Hairtooth," said one of the ogrillons to the other.

"I don't know Gnarl," said the other ogrillon. "Does it look tasty?"

"Maybe, although it also looks kind of stringy. Might not be worth the mastication."

Wondering idly about how the heck ogrillons knew how to use a word like mastication, Harry continued his advance towards them, holding up his hands and looking about as helpless as he could possibly look. "Hello there," he said, in the best elderly gentleman voice he could make which frankly wasn't all that good. The game seems to agree judging by the message that quickly appeared in front of his face.

Warning: A thespian you aren't!

When attempting to act out a role that you are not suited or trained for, you will lose +2 to charisma every thirty seconds for as long as you continue to try your hand at 'acting'.

Harsh Harry thought to himself, but then he was in front of the two ogrillons, still holding his hands up in the air. "Greetings, do you have any food for a weary traveler?"

"Food to give haha, no," the one called Hairtooth intoned, shaking his large, bald head, twisting his scrunched up, flattened face in a way that brought even more attention to his massive nostrils and wide, tooth-filled mouth. "Food to take from you maybe."

"Food to make of you, maybe," Gnarl agreed.

With that, he raised his club and Imoen promptly stabbed him in the back. She got both a critical hit and a backstab multiplying her damage, doing nearly enough to kill the ogrillon in a single blow, and the ogrillon she targeted squalled and shifted, falling back to its knees.

The other ogrillon turned roaring in anger and took a side and face full of arrow stone and magic missiles. By the time they hit and the ogrillons took the damage they dealt, Harry had one of his swords out. Leaping forward Harry pushed off the side of the ogrillon that was already kneeling, and then leaping sideways, stabbing his sword into the side of the neck of the one still standing despite the sling stones and arrows that had hit him.

That ogrillon fell dead, and Imoen finished off the one that was kneeling by sawing her sword along its throat.

“Heh, that worked,” Harry said with a smile.

“Despite your horrible acting,” Imoen said with a nod, but as the others headed towards them through the rain from the outcrop of rock where they’d been hiding, both of them fell silent, staring at the new message that had just appeared in their view from Harry’s AAS. It wasn’t talking about the experience. The experience had been nice, 300 per ogrillon, but this new message made that fade into insignificance in both their minds.

You are entering the Dungeon: **Gnoll Fortress**. Within its depths the Rashemani witch Dynaheir is being held in durance vile. To rescue her, you must cleanse this dungeon of the taint within.

Note:

Dungeons are unique combat zones where the rules of combat and Adventure are different than out in the Roaming World.

Your map ability will not work as previously impacted by the ‘fog of war’, which means that you must explore to open the map up. Further, the fog of war means that any segment you have explored will no long be seen in real time: enemies will be able to appear in segments that have been cleared previously without your knowledge unless one of your party members is in the area to see it.

Resting within a dungeon is fraught with danger as even if you keep someone on guard, you have a chance to be ambushed by the denizens of the dungeon. And even if you manage to sleep the night away, only half your available spells will have been memorized and you will not have recovered any Health Points.

Enemy respawn time is **heavily** magnified while in a dungeon, commensurate to how many Heart Stones are within the dungeon. Heart Stones are giant crystal stones that act like Zone Hearts within a dungeon. They will appear if a respawn point is cleared of its defenders.

Use of Tactics and Formations have their normal impact on a battle and can be created in a dungeon just as in the Roaming World. But each time you use a specific Formation the impact

will lessen as your enemies learn. In contrast, new formations will have an enhanced impact.
There is no impact to the effectiveness of Tactics. In other words, get gud, scrub!

The time active defensive and reinforcement type spells last are also shortened by half the original time.

Warning: many dungeons also come with a Dungeon Boss.

This message, which had been the blue of information being given, was immediately followed by another gold outlined message.

You have accepted the quest (medium) Defeat the Gnoll Fortress: In pursuit of your goal to free Dynaheir you have discovered a ancient fortress controlled by new, evil management. You must defeat the forces within in order to save the 'girl'.

To conquer the dungeon you must:

Slay the Dungeon Boss.

Note: vanquishing the Dungeon Boss may drop magical items and advanced loot.

Destroy the Heart Stones within. Rewards may vary.

Gnoll Heart stones x 2

Xvart Heart stones x 2

Rewards:

Heightened respect trust and friendship with Minsc. Warning the nature of this reward will be effected by choices made upon meeting the Rashemani Witch.

+14,000 experience for every party member. Travelling Companions and other allies will receive only X 2 experience for each personal kill.

Dynaheir may join your party. Warning, the nature of that joining will be affected by previous decisions.

Behind the two dimensional travelers, Khalid, and Minsc also stared as the message appeared in front of them. The large barbarian Ranger's eye bulged at the sight and he made to open his mouth, but Khalid very adroitly stepped to the side, accidentally tripping Minsc with a subtly outstretched foot. "Sorry about that my friend," he said reaching down to help the far larger human up onto his feet. It looked comical given the disparity between the Ranger and half-elf's size, and Edwin snorted in amusement, before moving on with Garrick and Jaheira.

Jaheira looked at her husband with one sardonic eyebrow raised, but he nodded at her, and she simply rolled her eyes and continued on. While Khalid was dealing with Minsc's inability to keep anything whatsoever from showing on his face, Imoen and Harry were glancing

at one another while cleaning their weapons to keep their mouths from being seen by their fellows. "Well there's a thing," Imoen whispered.

"What is a Dungeon Boss?" Harry whispered back, somewhat annoyed that the game didn't give him information on that first. *On the other hand, it normally only gives me information on my abilities or on what's right in front of me, so I suppose it makes sense.* Imoen was the only one of the two of them that had really gone into gaming before arriving in this world, so when something like this came up, Harry had to rely on her to give him some insight.

"Probably a Gnoll Chieftain on steroids in this case," She decided. "It won't be anything to world break-ish I suppose you could say, but it will be of definitely a tough battle." She then clicked her fingers, and idea coming to her. "What I'd wager, is a Dungeon Boss is something like a mid-level adventurer sort of thing. It'll probably have a lot of abilities, active and passive, lots of health, that kind of thing."

"So nothing we couldn't overcome with a lot of forethought and planning. Okay, that makes sense. But four of those respawn points? Dealing with them is going to be a bitch and a half."

"Truly," Imoen said with a sigh. "Mob hell, anyone?"

The phrase went right over Harry's head, and Imoen groaned wondering if she should ever take the time to sit him down and teach him some gamer terms, but decided against it as Harry sighed, staring up at the fortress, tracing their way up into it, frowning heavily. "Right." He breathed in deeply, thankful once more for the help the Gamer's mind gave him in controlling his emotions at times like this. "Right okay, we can do this. We will do this."

He turned to the others, both his party members and his traveling companions. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. Given what I can see up there, we shouldn't go straight to wherever we think they might be keeping their prisoners. This place is too big, the danger of us getting bogged down is way too high. We need to clear the fortress as we go, make certain we can't be surrounded and always make certain that we can retreat back down and out onto the path there."

"Retreat!?" Minsc commenced to bellow before Boo nipped him on the ear. He winced, then Boo chattered something and Minsc pouted. "Boo has reminded Minsc that at the moment, we are being sneaky thieves, and it is not the time yet for the bellowing of war cries and the lamentations of our enemies women. But still, we cannot retreat! Dynaheir is within, and I will not leave without my Witch!"

Harry didn't need the prompt that appeared in front of them just then to tell him this was a major decision and could have a major impact on their friendship, and he waved it away as he chose his words carefully. "That's not what I was saying Minsc but look up there. In that fortress, we could be surrounded. But if we retreat out onto this walkway, they'll have to come

at us along a single avenue of advance. And gnolls don't make good archers or anything like that right?" He added looking over to the two more experienced ventures.

The married half elves shook their heads and Harry turned back to Minsc. "While we can. You and I can hold the front line, while Imoen and the others rest behind us lob their arrows and stones over our heads. We won't be retreating, we'll be taking a defensive position, letting them bleed themselves on us, before taking the attack back to them."

Edwin snorted, stroking his goatee. "A fine rationalization, and one that was most probably needed for this simian. But for myself, I can see the true meaning and agree with it. But do you expect to command my spells in battle as you are attempting to dictate our movements?"

Harry knew that meant he was asking what his own rules of engagement should be and Harry took a moment to think about the spells the other wizard had on hand. "Garrick and you should hold back your area of effect spells unless we're faced with more than eight gnolls at a time," he said at last. "Beyond that, so long as you don't use an area of effects spell that could impact your allies, I'll leave the choice of whether or not to use them up to you."

He held up a finger when Garrick made to speak. The young Bard had been somewhat silent up to this point. Apparently whatever had happened last night with the dryad had impacted his normal insouciance. "Garrick, I want your songs on us in any battle when I call for them okay? And if you see any of those blue furred gnolls or see any of them trying to give out orders, those become priority targets. "We'll be heavily outnumbered, we need to keep the momentum, and will need to keep them from getting organized."

Edwin and Garrick both nodded at that, as it made sense. From there Harry quickly organized the group into two lines of three, ordering Minsc and Imoen across the bridge first. "See if your Hide in Shadows ability can work among the ruins of that gatehouse Minsc, and if so, keep pushing up the path with Imoen. If not, stay there until we're across."

Everyone agreed, considering how rickety the bridge looked the idea of sending two people across at a time was just good sense. Edwin did mutter about how Harry seemed to be getting used to giving out commands to him, but Harry ignored him. In contrast Jaheira and Khalid both approved of it, as did Garrick although not as much as the two half-elves.

By the time Khalid and Garrick were across, Harry had gotten used to the changes in his map. The fog of war was indeed irritating, cutting down the radius of his map to what his party could see, but it was everyone in that party, not just himself. As she scouted ahead, Imoen had dispelled the fog of war as easily as Harry had when he moved across the bridge, although it close up behind her as she exited Harry's sight. Still, he now knew that the walkway wound up along the sides of the cliff face. It met what looked like two natural trails around the right edge of the cliff, one on top of the other before the trail broke off to the right. That was as far as Imoen had gone, as at both points, there were groups of enemies.

But given how they were keeping his various abilities a secret Harry allowed Imoen to make her report when she returned several minutes later, having no interest in sharing even his map skill with Edwin unless under dire circumstances. *Garrick's a possibility in the long term, if I decide he can keep his mouth shut about that kind of thing. Right now, it's doubtful.* For some reason, Harry had still not warmed up to the other young man.

"Okay I was able to get up onto that first landing, it's basically a natural flat area in the side of a rock than anything else. There's a sort of semi-natural path leading off to one side. It looks natural at first, but it isn't really, not like that matters. Anyway, there are eight gnolls there sitting around a fire and looking right miserable with themselves at the moment. I pushed past them, and got in sight of the next landing, where there's another group of six gnolls. They aren't close though, I doubt they'd hear anything happening on the first landing, not in this rain. What's down that more natural trailed to left, I have no idea. I didn't follow it down" Imoen explained to the others.

Harry nodded slowly as if taking this in, idly noting that at least acting like this wasn't giving him a hit to his charisma. "If we take those six out, are there any other patrols or people nearby?"

"No idea Harry, I didn't see any. But..."

Jaheira and Khalid both nodded with the Warrior half-elf speaking. "Gn, gnolls m, m, might hate the rain and what it does t, t, to their sense of smell, but they will ha, ha, have patrols out."

"And it is for this reason that I had the perspicacity to practice my Silence spell," Edwin said with a nod. "If I am able to target them before they sound the alarm, we will be safe and able to take these pathetic creatures out piecemeal."

"That's kind of a tall order. Especially once I start using my own musically based spells," Garrick warned.

"...I don't think so," Jaheira cut in. She had been standing next to Minsc, having been conferring with the Ranger. "I believe this storm is going to get worse gentlemen, I apologize for my earlier optimism on that score. We are going to be going from a light drizzle to practically swimming soon. No lightning or thunder thankfully, but quite a lot of rain."

Harry nodded, shrugging his shoulders. "Honestly, that'll probably help us given the reaction the gnolls are already having to the rain."

"Yeah, but our sight's going to be messed up too," Imoen warned.

"Minsc, do you think this will help your ability to stay hidden?"

"The rain will help my ability to Hide in Shadows yes," he said firmly. "Although Minsc is not as much of a fan of this sneaking and backstabbing."

“Right now, you don’t have to like it, just do it,” Harry replied bluntly, causing, oddly enough, a message of his receiving +10 respect from Jaheira, regaining the ground he’d lost before. Khalid and Edwin too both seemed to approve, though Harry felt it was for very different reasons. “Besides, I rather think that the tale which will be told after this day will be better if we actually conquer this fortress, rather than fail to do so right?”

“Truly!” Minsc said with a low chuckle, having learned his lesson earlier about using his true barbarian voice as he thought of it.

“O, one more warning. W, we need to all remember what impact the rain will have on our b, b, bowstrings. It will make them slowly unusable if w, we aren’t careful.”

Harry nodded, but turned that discussion over to Khalid, who walked Imoen and Garrick through a quick way to string, restring and protect their bowstrings when not in use. When Khalid indicated he was done, Harry took over once more, beginning to give out orders. He and Khalid took the lead of the five remaining after Minsc and Imoen led the way up the steep side of the rock path. With the rain and his armor, it was somewhat harder going for the Ranger than for the leather clad Imoen, who hadn’t noted how steep the trail was in parts. But Minsc was still able to activate his Hide in Shadows ability, fading from sight but not from Harry’s map.

He waited until he could see that he she and Imoen were on the other side of the six Gnolls, before looking at Khalid, and holding up his sword. “Ready?”

Khalid nodded, and the two of them barreled up the last few steps – more wide flat cuts in the rock than actual steps - which had been obscuring them from the gnolls. Both of them were somewhat surprised how long it took the gnolls to respond to them being there. Each of the gnolls were hunched under cloaks spread held over their heads in both hands, and only looked up as the sound of their approach reached them, their eyesight not being great at the best of times and now almost useless at anything beyond pike range.

They threw off their cloaks growling and snarling at one another and the troopers as they grabbed up their weapons. But by then, the two charging warriors were in among them. A second later Imoen and Minsc attacked from behind the gnolls.

Behind them, Garrick, Jaheira and Edwin followed. Edwin stayed back, watching for any sign of movement past the combat as he had been told to. Despite his earlier semi-whispered comments about Harry’s parentage and his daring to give a wizard like Edwin orders, he didn’t actually argue with those orders themselves. It was true they needed to keep these dog-headed cretins from becoming aware of their presence en masse for as long as possible.

Imoen backstabbed one of the gnolls, ignoring the sight of the information popping up on her eyes as her strike hit home, twisting around and racing up one of the slopes, where she activated her Hide in Shadows as soon as she could. There she waited, using her senses to extend Harry’s map as much as anything else, watching the pass leading upwards closely.

The Gnolls really didn't stand much of a chance. Disorientated, with two of their number dead, and the berserker Minsc, Harry and Khalid in their midst, three more of them died before they could even raise their weapons. The others fell soon after, the last with an arrow from Garrick in his chest.

"Imoen," Harry called quietly, hoping his voice would carry. "Come back."

Two minutes later, as Harry and the others were disposing of the bodies by tossing them off the cliff side, making it seem as if the Gnolls had just wandered off, Imoen came racing back. "Patrol incoming. Slowly, and very miserably, but they are moving down this way."

"Get out of sight," Harry ordered everyone, and Minsc and Imoen promptly once more used Hide in Shadows, while the others retreated back down the way they came very slightly. A second later, two gnolls came down the pathway, muttering and snapping at one another standing close and dragging their feet, the very picture of annoyed.

The two hiding warriors attacked the two patrolmen the instant it became clear they had seen the fact that no one is on watch. Harry instantly ordered the others up and at them, when the two in hiding engaged, but by the time they did, Imoen and Minsc had already dealt with them both. Backstab was just that nasty a force multiplier.

"All right," Harry said, grinning at how successful that had been. "Imoen, start laying some traps here on this ledge, and upwards. Nothing major just yet I think, small ones that will annoy and slow any response down. Don't use your makeshift grease trap yet. Minsc, let's go down the path that way. We don't want to be cut off by anything coming up behind us."

Minsc obeyed with alacrity, shouldering his large claymore blade in favor of his bow and arrow, as he did so. Edwin blinked at that, his eyes narrowing before quickly assuming a look of neutrality before Harry or the others notice. *Fascinating, one individual able to organize his item box is intriguing. Two in the same party is interesting, but not outside the realm of possibility given the fact that they espouse to be related. But a third, moreover one who has not been in their company over long, having the same skill with his Item Box? That is beyond strange. Especially considering the individual in question and the habitual Adventurer skills that berserkers are bestowed. Something is going on here...*

However, luck turned against the Adventurers a few moments after the others had set off after Minsc. He had moved around corner in the trail to the right that wound it's way further up the crag when his Hide in Shadows failed. Harry watched as six xvarts charged him at the same time that an alarm of some kind was raised. He watched intently for a few seconds eyes scanning back along the route as shown by his map to make certain that the entire fortress hadn't been roused, while more xvarts appeared around Minsc's position. Once he was certain the whole dungeon hadn't been warned of their presence, he shouted out, "I think I hear something ahead, Minsc must've run into trouble," and racing after the other man.

They came upon Minsc slowly being surrounded by the small blue furred creatures, his broadsword was out, and he was cleaving at them, killing one as they watched, then decapitating two more. But six had become twelve, had become twenty four, all of them surrounding him pressing him backwards toward edge of the path.

One of them was able to get under his guard, cutting at his side and Harry saw the message:

Minsc has been dealt seven damage to health.

Then he barreled into the side of the massive blue furred sub-humans causing another message to appear in his eyesight.

You have attempted to use Shield Bash. Shield Bash is a high level Warrior skill. You do not meet the level requirements for this skill.

However despite that, he had been able to bowl over at least the xvart that he had aimed for, and he stomped down hard with one foot, crushing the little creatures rib cage as his sword flashed out. "Edwin, wait for it, we want more enemies in range before we use area effect spells," he ordered, shouting to be heard over the tumult of the fight and the rain, which was now coming down heavily. Regardless, given how many of the xvarts there were in sight, Harry felt that the cave his map showed to one side – Harry couldn't see it through the rain - might be the entrance to one of the Heart Stones, a respawn point.

When seven more Xvarts came out to be marked by his map, that confirmed it in Harry's mind, and he began to shout further orders. "Jaheira, heal Minsc. Khalid, switch to swords and join me here. Garrick, Song of Regeneration, then use your bow if you can. Edwin, no spells at all just yet."

By that point, Harry had killed three of the little creatures, and had reached Minsc's side.

"Minsc is sorry for the trouble. I stepped on a bit of gravel that moved under my foot oddly, only to discover it was a piece of bone. Then the Xvarts were on me," the larger man grunted as he brought his sword down, bisecting a Xvart lengthwise.

This caused his sword to stick in the ground for a second which opened him up for another Xvart to try to stab him in the side, but Harry danced around behind Minsc, daring the path's edge to put himself between Minsc's attacker and his side. His sword cut the creature down and he stumbled forward, pushing two more backwards to get some more breathing space.

By this point, some fifteen of the Xvarts had fallen, but others had pushed in to get at even Edwin and Jaheira now. In reply Garrick switched to his short sword after intoning not only a Song of Regeneration but also a Spell of Courage, adding to their armor and strength along with giving the party health regeneration. But still more of the little creatures kept coming. And

now Imoen was racing towards them shouting out “there’s a patrol coming, eight gnolls, I think my traps can deal with a few, but not that many. I was only able to put down three traps down before everything went to hell.”

Thinking quickly, Harry decided they couldn’t hold back any longer and he shouted, “Edwin, fireball and Garrick, Grease spell straight into the cave!”

Edwin instantly replied in the affirmative, followed a second later by Garrick although his simple okay was lost in Edwin’s more voluble response. “About time you fool! Die you pathetic little creatures! Burn in the fires of my magics!” He waited a brief instant for Garrick’s spell, a fog of grease, to appear and land among the xvarts, before his fireball lanced out, entering the cave.

While the fireball didn’t spread back out of the cave and so didn’t spread the fire into the xvarts that had already appeared out of the cave, it stopped anymore from coming, and Harry quickly shifted their priorities, shouting out, “Khalid, fall back to the other side of Edwin and Jaheira. Garrick you too. Imoen, switch to archery.” All but Edwin had been using hand to hand weapons, but without further xvarts coming, enough had been put down by this point that they could break off and move behind Harry and Minsc.

“I assume that means that I am now clear to use my spells on the gnolls?” Edwin asked sardonically, as he moved in into the central position, having no qualms about putting Khalid and Jaheira between him and the gnolls. After all, that was their purpose as meat shields.

“Yes!” Harry shouted, ducking under a blow from one xuart, which had actually leaped into the air over one of his fellows. He dodged it entirely, then as the xuart landed on all fours, nudged the creature, with his back, sending it off the cliff face, before slicing out into another. Two more struck at him, but his shield moved automatically blocking both, and Harry whooped in his mind, *let’s hear it for sword and shield style!*

At that point, the xvarts at last began to break, seeing their fellows being cut down so liberally and no more reinforcements coming out of the cave. Harry watched as first two, then four, then all eight remaining xvarts broke their dots turning from red to yellow on his map. “Garrick, Imoen, finish them off. Minsc, with me.”

The pikes of the gnolls were a much more serious threat than the short swords of the equally short Xvarts. He was already bleeding from a few cuts through his armor, but his shield was moving just as quickly as Harry’s would have in his place to block the incoming pike thrusts and the gnolls were so large only three could really fight him at any one time, and even that was a squeeze. Meanwhile, Jaheira, Imoen and Garrick and Edwin rained down fire on them from behind the bulwark Khalid supplied.

Now the two he’d named broke off, switching places with Harry and Minsc. They hunted down the eight xvarts before they could get too far down the trail, which continued past the cave.

Minsc and Harry charged on to either side of Khalid, taking position alongside him, getting in under a few of the Gnolls defenses before they could realize two more hand-to-hand combat and said appeared. Harry gutted his opponent quickly, ignoring the critical hit message that appeared on his in his eyesight, as Minsc nearly cut in half his own opponent at the waist using his Cleave skill. However, another gnoll slammed his pike's head into Minsc's side, causing him to grunt and stumble back, blood flowing from his side.

Enemy gnoll has achieved a Critical Hit on Minsc. -25 to health.

That gnoll went down to an arrow in the head from Imoen, and two more were felled by slingshots from Edwin and Jaheira along with a single Magic Missile spell. At the same time, Harry, Khalid and the wounded Minsc continued to press forward.

At that point, the three gnolls in the back of the pack began to retreat, two of them actually turning the yellow of broken enemies racing away. Seeing this on his map, Harry shouted "Edwin!" and pointed at them with his sword, the edge dripping blood despite the rain.

This opened Harry up in turn to the last gnoll, but his sword and shield style was high enough that his tower shield moved to take the brunt of the thrust from the gnoll's halberd easily. It still caused Harry to stumble backwards but he then twisted around the strike, a move that allowed Harry to lash out with his sword, cutting that warrior's arm off at the forearm. A second later, his sword flashed up again, cutting the gnoll's throat, by which time the last two fleeing had been felled as well.

Harry had not only been fighting the enemies in front of them, he had been watching his map, making certain that no further gnolls were moving to attack them, and he breathed a sigh of relief as that seemed to be the case. Not even any more Xvarts were coming out of the cavern behind them. He took the time though to turn and shout "Garrick, anymore xvarts over there? And how far down the trail can you see?"

Garrick replied in the negative, then added "And not very far. This rain's insane! But I doubt the sound of the fight will have carried very far either."

"All right, regroup on me." As the others did, Harry turned to Imoen, thinking hard. "Imoen head back to the first area we head, set up what traps you can, in particular those grease traps but make those on the trail leading here along the cliffside rather than up the trail or in the meeting point. Smaller traps elsewhere, little things, not big ones."

"Multiple small traps? Got it," Imoen replied with a nod, racing off, disappearing from sight not only through the rain but because of her Thief skill Hide in Shadows.

"Everyone else, I think we need to break out the healing berries. Conserve your spells, Jaheira," he added, when she made to heal Khalid with it one of them. "We can eat now, we can't eat in battle."

Rolling her eyes at that homily, Jaheira did so. All of them had taken a few nicks and bruises, nothing serious beyond Minsc's wound, but even so, that kind of thing could pile up. But soon enough, even Minsc was back to a hundred percent.

Imoen did not return for a while, while the others waited for her patiently, or impatiently in Edwin's case. The rain and the fact he'd been forced to defend himself with his staff physically a moment ago had not helped his normally irascible attitude at all. "Correct me if I'm wrong," he drawled "but did you not say that momentum and movement would be most important?"

"I also said organization would be, and defending our back," Harry retorted. "But if you wish to head into that cave without our scout and one of our archers with us, we can do so..."

Edwin huffed, but made no further comment. Instead, he began to go over how many spells he had left, a discussion that Garrick joined, until Edwin's glare sent him away. Harry however listened to them both closely and was somewhat satisfied. Edwin had prepared very well last night and had emphasized his distance type spells over close range ones. The only issue was the number of Silence spells he had.

Soon Imoen returned, and Harry nodded at her. "You all right?"

She nodded back, shrugging her shoulders. "I might be getting run ragged, but I actually haven't gotten hurt just yet," she quipped.

"Good," Harry said thinly, gesturing to the cave. "So, do you feel like sticking your head in there?"

"If I said no would you listen?"

Harry chuckled. "Unfortunately not. Wish we had more thieves with us, you're useful fellows to have around."

"Oh thank you kind sir," Imoen drawled, bowing with a flourish. Harry laughed, but looked at her seriously, and she shrugged. "Don't worry about it Harry," she said calmly, reaching up slightly to ruffle his hair. "I can handle it."

Harry tugged on her arm, and mockingly got Imoen into a chokehold. While the others were all rolling their eyes, Harry whispering into her rear "And if you're in there, and out of Edwin's sight, you're free to use anything you need spell-wise."

"Don't have to tell me twice," she whooped, as if Harry had been tickling her.

"Children, do I have to separate you?" Jaheira asked dryly.

Harry huffed, but released Imoen who moved to the entrance to the cavern, slipping inside without another word.

Inside, she instantly found herself facing around thirty xvarts, all of them set up in a loose semicircle around the entrance. There were a few among them who looked tougher and stronger, which she recognized as Xvarts elites, and two of those had far better looking swords, although her own Identify skill wasn't nearly high enough for her to tell more about them. *Not even if I had them in my hand. I wonder if it's wisdom that I need in order to activate my metamorphic powers or constitution?* she ruminated thoughtfully, counting heads, noting positions, and also seeing there was one of those large worm things in one corner. *I wonder why the xvarts like that thing. Meh, don't matter much I suppose. Now time to get this party started!*

Smirking slightly, Tonks wiggled her fingers, one hand thrust out towards the large worm thing, and the other to the other end of the xvart line. "Reducto Bombarda!" She shouted, hurling out one spell then the other. She grimaced at the hit to her health points, but then turned, racing out of the cave like the bats of hell were after her as the surviving xvarts noticed she was there and screeched their war cries.

Outside, she found that Harry had set up the group of adventurers in the same sort of semi half-circle that they had used so well against the xvart Village, minus the natural obstacle. He also hadn't had Jaheira summon up any more monsters to help them, but against xvarts, that would probably have been superfluous anyway. Even with the numbers that were coming after them now. When she moved into a position between Garrick and Jaheira Imoen instantly felt the power up, getting a notification of:

You have joined the Formation, Concave Line.

+2 to every defensive skill or ability of party members. +1 to the same for allied combatants.

+2 to armor type of party members. +1 to the same for allied combatants.

At the same time, Harry and Khalid and strode forward. The two of them with their heavier armor held the front of the cavern, and the xvarts couldn't get past them without getting in one another's way, while the others simply rained hell from behind them.

In a far shorter amount of time than anyone but Harry and Imoen had thought possible, the tide of xvarts faded out, the last few of them panicking, running back inside the cavern. "How many did we miss?" Harry asked looking over at Imoen.

She chewed on some of the healing berries for a moment, healing from her use of the Blood Magic as she counted off on her fingers while looking at the pile of corpses that had piled up in front of the entrance to the cavern. "Erm... five or so?"

"Okay, Minsc, with me. Everyone else, rest up, see to your bowstrings and everything else, and be on the lookout for more trouble coming up from behind us."

“You don’t want me to head that way?” Imoen asked, pointing down the seemingly natural path. They could tell it twisted back up the hill and maybe even split into several different paths.

“Not yet,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “I think that would just be borrowing trouble at this point. Minsc and I will finish off this group of xvarts, then we’ll continue that way.”

“I feel that I must protest once more,” Edwin growled. “In a battle like this, momentum is everything. We have it now, what serves the purpose of finishing off these pathetic Xvarts.”

Harry pointed ahead of them down the natural seeming path.

“Because I think that this place must have some way of rousing itself once the alarm is given. And I refuse to let that happen with enemies behind us. We just saw an example of how dangerous that can be,” he said, gesturing to the dead bodies of the gnolls, which been left where they were for the moment, his sword making a splashing down through the rain of the area.

Edwin snorted, but didn’t say anything more, and Harry received notification.

Your ability to actually argue your point has one you some respect from Edwin. Is a blue moon out? + 10 to Edwin’s Respect.

Snorting slightly at that, Harry and Minsc headed into the cave. They found four more Xvarts than they had expected, three others showing up on his maps as the yellow of broken enemies, hissing at one another in a pile in the corner with one of the other four standing over them growling angrily.

That worthy turned and with the three other Xvart Elite others attacked quickly.

But Harry and Minsc didn’t let the group of cowardly Xvarts have enough time to rally themselves. Minsc instantly switched from his broadsword to his bow, an arrow flying out and piercing one of them straight through the chest and out its back, sticking it to the side of the cavern such was the power of the strike. Then he switched back and roared charging forward. “Buttkicking for goodness!”

Harry raced alongside him, not bothering with a warcry although he wondered idly if warcries could serve some actual purpose via his abilities. *Something to think about later* he thought, as he used his shield to knock aside one blow from one of the Xvart Elites, stabbing around his tower shield into the thing’s face, then flinging himself around, slicing into another one with his shield’s edge.

By that point, Minsc had hacked the last two Elites apart using his **Cleave** ability to slice both of them at once with one mighty blow. Stabbing the two more cowardly Xvarts was somewhat anticlimactic after that.

With that done, Harry turned his attention to the elephant in the cavern, the giant crystal set into the center of it. The thing had risen up as they had killed the xuart elites, and now it seemed to hover in the air, pulsing with purple and orange energy. He and Minsc looked at one another, and said as one "Heart Stone," after which Harry read the description quickly.

Heart Stone.

Durability 100/100

A physical manifestation of a dungeon's ability to respawn the creatures within a Dungeon, once under attack the Heart Stone will defend itself by respawning a certain number of enemies until a certain number of monsters have been created. That number varies from Heart Stone to Heart Stone and is heavily effected by the type of monster being spawned and the overall size of the dungeon.

Heart Stones are destructible for a given value of the phrase. You can destroy them, but they will come back. However, they will not come back quickly, the timeframe being from several days to nearly a year and a half.

Destroying a Heart Stone resets the dungeon's respawn cycle, minus the monsters tied directly to the Heart Stone. Each Heart Stone can both spawn its given creatures on its own, and is linked to a secondary respawn zone. It also counts towards clearing the dungeon. You must destroy every Heart Stone before the dungeon can be cleared.

At times for higher level monsters, destroying a dungeon core will give you immediate loot rather than having to wait to clear the Dungeon Boss.

Why a year and a half Harry thought, before switching out from his sword to his hammer, figuring it would be easier to destroy the thing rather than try to slice through it.

Warning: destruction of the heart stone will have consequences!

"And that's not ominous at all," Harry muttered, using both hands on his Warhammer. "Watch out Minsc, this might cause something to be summoned."

"Of course friend!" Minsc bellowed cheerfully. Inside the cave, he no longer had any need to find his volume after all and was enjoying the experience after having had to be silent outside. "Do not worry, nothing will harm you as long as Minsc is here to guard your back."

"I don't doubt it," Harry said with a laugh, then reared back and hammered the hammer's head into the Heart Stone. It only took about fifteen durability points off though, and he scowled. "Right, spell time."

Harry backed up and looked over at Minsc. "Remember we're keeping my spells a secret from Edwin, and possibly from Garrick and your witch. I realize it puts you in an awkward position, and if you don't want to actually see them in practice, you can turn away."

"I will not. Your Blood Magic spells are strange and unusual, but you and Imoen have proven to be true companions. I will keep your secrets, unless my Witch asks me whether or not you have magic. In that case, my oath to her means that I will not lie."

Harry nodded firmly. "That's good enough for me, my friend."

Minsc grinned at him, and crossed his powerful arms watching everything around them with keen eyes as Harry thrust out both hands, shouting out "Bombarda!" It took two spells for him to destroy the Heart Stone, but when it went, it exploded, sending shards of crystal everywhere. Luckily, Harry had anticipated that, and both of them had backed well away from the thing.

"Right," Harry said with a nod. "Long-distance destruction is the way to go for those things. If we had been standing right next to it..." At that point Harry interrupted himself as both of them saw the notification.

You have destroyed a Heart Stone. Enemy respawn time reset. Enemies have respawned, but will no longer respawn as quickly throughout the dungeon. Respawn time remaining: one hour.

"Shit!" Harry groaned, twisting around to the cavern caverns entrance. "Let's go!"

By the time they were outside, Imoen had returned quickly from back along their trail, while Garrick was retreating back the other way. "We've got problems!" Garrick shouted, the first to reach the rest of the group. "I got a horde of Xvarts coming our way, I don't know how many, but I heard them way before I saw them through this."

He had to shout to be heard over the sound of the rain, which had somehow started to come down even heavier. It was like a physical force now, almost knocking Harry off his feet for a moment after the warm and dry cavern.

Harry dredged up the memory of the bestiary page he'd seen for xvarts, remembering that they didn't have any kind of extra senses, which was a very darn good thing in his opinion.

"All right," he said holding up a hand for Imoen. "And let me guess, we have gnolls coming from the other end?" She nodded, and Harry asked. "Imoen, do you have any traps that can slow down those Xvarts?"

"Grease traps," replied promptly. "Part of their property is to make people slip and slide. On a short walkway like this, they'll be even deadlier."

Harry nodded, sharply. "Do it in front of the xvarts. Protect our rear."

"The rest of us, let's get into formation." He paused for a moment thinking about the formation they were going to take then as the others clustered around, described it in the air with a finger. "I want us to form a 'T' shape. This pathway is wide enough for three of us to fight

alongside one another, if we're careful. Big guy, I know you don't like it, but can you switch to a sword and shield?"

"I can my friend, but I'll warn you, my abilities with such will not be as good. as with my mighty weapon!"

Edwin could not let that one go, and shook his head, snarkily remarking, "I rather doubt your 'weapon' is all that mighty. I have found that Rangers and Barbarians both lack in that regard."

"We just want to create a sort of semi-shield wall," Harry cut in before Minsc could reply, whatever that might have been. And when we hit them, I want you to let out of bellow, as loud and as frightful as you possibly can. We're going to take them at the charge."

"Thus putting more distance between us and the Xvarts. Sound thinking that," Jaheira nodded. "You didn't ask Imoen how many there were though, she added gesturing over her shoulder to where Imoen had disappeared out of most of their sight through the rain along the path leading further upwards through the rocks. Jaheira and Khalid could still see her thanks to their half elf heritage, but the others couldn't.

"I didn't because it doesn't matter. We have to defeat them, then turned and deal with the Xvarts. But if there's more than twelve, I'll want you Jaheira, and you Edwin to switch from your long range weapons to spellfire. Now, let's get into formation."

Edwin rolled his eyes, wondering why Harry was talking about formations and such, but after the way his commands had allowed them to massacre a whole xvart village, and now near to half those numbers again, he didn't argue. Instead he merely took his position at the back of the 'handle' of the T shaped formation. In his mind, it was the place of most defense, and therefore the perfect place for the most important person, I.E., him.

You have created the formation: **Hammer Time.**

As it's name implies, this is allegedly an offensive formation, used best when on the move to strike the enemy.

X 4 to melee speed before combat begins

X 2 damage after combat is joined.

Smiling Harry looked over at Khalid on his left, and Minsc on his right. Harry had done that deliberately, wanting to use his's sword and shield tactics to help Minsc out defensively. And he wanted his tower shield in the center. They both nodded firmly, and Harry thrust out his sword towards the incoming gnolls, who had begun to appear to shoe who did not have his map.

"Charge!" Harry shouted, just as the gnolls looked up, and realized there were enemies.

The front line of the Gnolls thrust forward with her pikes, but Harry and the others took them on their shields, even Minsc able to block that first thrust, pushing them away, getting in underneath the halberd shafts and then crashing bodily into the first two gnolls, pushing them back into a few of their fellows.

You have created the tactic: At the Run!

Moving quickly and with weight beyond your controlled charge, you can inflict morale and physical damage to a higher degree.

Party member attacks do X 1.5 damage. Does not transfer to Travelling companions.

All enemies will be more likely to break and flee as long as you continue pressing forward.

Behind them, Jaheira and the others began to fire into the horde.

There were ten gnolls and two gnoll elites, but only six of the enemy could attack the front of the line at any one time. Three of them could thrust over or under the arms of their fellows at the front, but that made for poor striking power and more often than not they just got in one another's way. The gnolls were not intelligent enough to realize that, and the first four went down in less than a minute, with Harry and the others step standing over their bodies and cutting forward.

One more was smashed entirely off the path by Harry, who caught him at just the right time to find the gnoll off-balance thrusting forward with the edge of his tower shield, cracking his knee and causing him to collapse over the side of the path. He fell screaming, his screams almost instantly disappearing in the sound of the rain.

Meanwhile, Edwin had begun to intone spells. None of them were area affect spells he didn't want to waste a good fireball in this downpour after all. But the back of the gnoll line was now taking hits, and three of them in the center, unable to retreat and unable to attack, began to panic.

The two of the Gnolls at the back of the group began to retreat, and Harry noticed this on his map instantly. "Edwin, Spell of silence!" Edwin broke off one spell, muttering under his breath. But obeying still made sense, and the efficacy of this charge that Harry had ordered had once more affirmed the fact that despite his youth, the young man did know what he was doing.

His spell struck, and the two fleeing Gnolls found themselves silenced, unable to speak, unable to use the special howl that would summon others to their aid. They still raced away from the battle, and Harry had to quickly ordered Garrick and Imoen forward. The fastest of the group on their feet, the two of them raced after the fleeing Gnolls, cutting them down from behind with their arrows before they could get too far. Imoen then nodded towards Garrick, gesturing over the side of the cliff. "Let's get the bodies over the edge. Don't want to give the game away after all."

Garrick nodded glumly, moving forward to help her with the first dead body, which she had just lightened with one of her Blood Magic spells, though he hadn't noticed which one. "You know, my minstrels songs ever mentioned anything like this."

"What 'this' are you talking about, the rain, the blood and guts, or the need to get rid of the bodies after the fight?"

"Yes," Garrick replied dryly, causing Imoen to laugh, her voice lost in the tumult of the rain coming down all around them.

Back with the others, Harry had reformed the rest of the party into a line of two abreast, with Harry and Minsc once more in the front, and Khalid having fallen back to join the others as they moved to deal with the xvarts. They found that many of the xvarts had been felled by the grease trap, with others simply piling into them.

Harry blinked and stopped Minsc and Khalid from moving forward, instead turning to Edwin gesturing to the mass of the xvarts. "I don't suppose you have a spell that would deal with these without using fire?"

"I do prefer fire," Edwin drawled. "It is the most powerful of the elements in my opinion. Still..." With another wave of his hands and a thrust forward Edwin conjured up a Cone of Cold, the only spell of that type he had, freezing many of the Xvarts where they were, and further hampering the others.

With that, Harry and Minsc switched to their long range weapons, and just pelted the group of Xvarts from afar, switching targets to any that broke and tried to run back along the passage. It was like shooting fish in a barrel thanks to the grease trap's continued effect and Edwin's initial spell. It took a while, and Imoen and Garrick were able to return and join the slaughter before they were finished.

"That grease trap works a treat," Harry said with a wan smile, not having enjoyed the one-sided massacre even if he knew it had to be done. "How many of those can you create?"

Imoen went over her inventory, her eyes flicking this way and that seen in the rain by any. "I don't have enough ropes or tripwires to use all the grog we have unfortunately. Five traps I think. I can possibly double down, make them larger though, cover more area and last longer I mean." With traps, there was a lot of room for changing things and going beyond the basic design.

Harry thought for a moment, then gestured forward. "Garrick, Minsc can I ask you to scout along here? Minsc take the lead, Garrick back him up just in case, stay out of sight of one another in the rain, that means you should be out of sight of anyone he runs into. But I want him to have some backup."

"While Minsc is more than strong enough to deal with any of these little creatures, he is grateful to know that help will be at hand. Besides, young Garrick is a Bard! And having one

close is always important if you want your deeds spread near and far to further put the fear of a good buttkicking in the hearts of Evil!”

Chuckling at his large friend’s attitude, Harry turned to the others. “As for the rest of us, I think we should get in out of the rain for a bit.”

He and Khalid had taken several hits in the melee, and now they began to use the health berries to recover their health, while Imoen moved around the cavern, searching for anything shiny basically. She handed over the short swords of the Xvarts elite, which Harry quickly identified.

Short Sword +1

While somewhat crudely made, swords like these still contain a slight magical enhancement to them that makes them better than the average short sword.

Durability 50/100

Harry promptly handed the sword with the most durability back to Imoen who could use short short swords as well as she could a bow. None of the rest of what she found was at all interesting, a few gems, a few coins, and several dozen skulls etched with different markings on them which she left in place. They seemed worthless to her.

Regardless, the time out of the rain was nice for everyone except for Jaheira, who actually refused to come into the cavern, preferring to stay outside in the rain. “All the better to be closer to nature,” she had told them all, which even Khalid had thought was rather silly. Harry simply asked her to with Garrick after he Minsc.

Once Imoen was finished looking around and making sure that place wasn’t trapped, she too left the cavern, heading back the way they’d come to be on the lookout for further patrols.

“It boggles the mind that our eradication of that first group of Gnolls has not yet sounded the alarm among the rest of the fortress,” Edwin opined as he watched Imoen once more brave wind and rain.

“I think it’s the rain. Or the combination of the rain and the fact that they’re not all that organized despite, as Jaheira said earlier, being one of the more organized of the beast races. Two points above zero isn’t all that high, after all,” Harry quipped.

Edwin chuckled at that, but soon enough, they all moved back out into the rain. They found Jaheira and Garrick waiting for them, gesturing along the path to the left from their starting position. Before the bard could report, Jaheira spoke up peremptorily. “Imoen says she hasn’t spotted any more patrols coming, but Minsc found a few dozen more of those Xvarts moving around out there like a patrol. This path becomes a passage through a series of crags just after where the xvarts turned back, Minsc

With Jaheira in the lead now, the group moved after Minsc while Harry examined the map silently. Thanks to Minsc, it had updated itself just as much as if Imoen had been the one doing the scouting. He scratched his chin thoughtfully as he examined their position. Ahead of them, as Minsc had reported through the other two, the path split up. Indeed, it became a regular kind of warren, several different branches moving around larger rock formations. Still there seemed to still be one central path going forward, and none of the trails were all that long, so they could explore them with relative ease.

“How many more fireball or grease spells do you have?” he asked, looking over at Garrick and Edwin. Edwin replied that he had three, while Garrick replied he only had one grease spell left. He did however still have two Scorcher spells, but that was nothing to Edwin’s spell repertoire. “I also have Aganazzar’s Scorcher, Shocking hands, Acid Arrow, Fire Arrow, two more Silence spells and a few other surprises. But with this rain, alas, the efficacy of fire based magic will be badly eroded.”

Harry thought about it for a few minutes, then nodded slowly. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. Jaheira, could you and Imoen head back to the first cross path? I want you to summon up a few animals. No traps, just animals, something to slow any patrol down. Once that’s done find us, we’ll have attacked that next xuart patrol already. I don’t want any spell work for a bit, not until we find the next respawn point.

Once more, they use the formation hammer time, thundering out of the rain into the startled xuart patrol, rushing out of the rain around them. And it worked even better against them than it had against the gnolls. The gnolls hadn’t broken, they’d simply been surprised and unable to fight back for a moment. The xvarts on the other hand shrieked in terror, several of them breaking instantly racing back down the passage, while others were so startled, they turned and fled down another portion of the causeway which would prove to be a dead end. This allowed Harry, Khalid and Minsc to cross the intervening distance, getting among the xvarts before they could regain their senses.

Once the patrol was dealt with, the runners having been shot down by Garrick and Edwin, Harry and Khalid went after the runners who had gone the other way. As they did, Harry blinked as two red dots appeared on the portion of the map near where Imoen and Jaheira were. He had noticed the appearance of three new green dots signifying the creatures Jaheira had summoned into being as the rest of the party attacked the xuart patrol, but the red dots had come in from outside the mapped area. As Harry watched, the two dots fought the three animals, before Imoen attacked from behind and Jaheira from the front.

As the dots disappeared, there was a *ping* and a new message appeared in front of Harry’s eyes.

Your party has found and killed a patrol.

Patrols are small groups of monsters which are set to move around the dungeon in set movements and at set times, or around certain areas of the dungeon.

Killing patrols can keep your party from being discovered, but not doing so quickly enough can cause the entire dungeon to become aware of your presence if there is one Dungeon Boss controlling the entire dungeon. If not, then only the monster class who made up the patrol will be aware of your presence.

Patrol sizes can be effected by the size of the dungeon, not the number of heart stones, although there is often a correlation between the two.

Xvart patrols killed: 1/?

Gnoll patrols killed: 1/?

Next gnoll patrol time: 15 minutes.

Harry quickly checked the respawn countdown and noticed they had forty minutes on it before the next respawn time. That was good. The patrol time was bad, but workable too depending on the size of the patrols.

The two women quickly rejoined the rest of the party, and Harry sent Imoen and Minsc ahead of them, but this time, the rest stayed within sight of them. Harry wanted to speed this up and get back to the main path up towards the keep on the heels of the patrol, at least. The group made their way forward, discovering that the passage split up among the rocks. A few dogs and other animals roamed here, but not many.

Two xvart patrols of six each were dealt with easily, bringing the total of those patrols they'd killed to three, but they didn't seem to have a set timer to them, so Harry figured they were more guard posts than patrols. They'd had to pause and send Imoen and Minsc to deal with another gnoll patrol in that time, which had been composed of four this time rather than two. And they were still moving forward cautiously enough that the next patrol was due soon as well.

After that however, Imoen and Minsc found the entrance to another cavern set behind a group of fourteen xvarts milling around. Unlike gnolls they were active in the rain, doing something to a few long strips of some kind of meat that, in Imoen's words, "Smells like a weird mix of spunk and sick."

This pronouncement caused everyone, even Jaheira to just stare at her. Before anyone could ask the obvious question, Harry held up his hand. "Nope. Nope, nope, nope. Not going to go there people. Besides, we don't have much time left before the next respawn time. If my guess is right on that anyway. Same tactic as before people, we plow right into them. We clear them out, we gain the entrance to the cave and we murder the xvarts as they appear. Imoen, stay back and when we gain the entrance to the cavern, break off and head back down the passage to guard our back."

Edwin twitched at that, one eyebrow rising under his hood as he stared at the similarly hooded back of Harry's head. *Hmm, interesting. I wonder if he is truly so perspicacious to work that out, or... hmm...*

For the third time, the shock of the adventurer's racing out of the rain caught the xvarts as they rushed forward silent until they were already upon the xvarts. But after that, as Harry had predicted the cavern spawned xvarts by the dozen. But by that point, as before Minsc and Harry had gained the front of the cavern, and the wave of Xvarts which should have drowned any opponent in sheer numbers was broken up, halted there in place, the majority of them unable to get around the front ranks.

Behind them, once again, Khalid led the others in a long range bombardment over Harry and Minsc's heads. Most of that fire wasn't aimed, but thanks to the narrow confines of the cavern entrance, it didn't have to be.

The sheer numbers of the Xvarts pushed the two warriors back, but more of them were dying, and Harry shouted out "Spread out, form a semicircle, Garrick, Edwin, wait for it." As they did, Harry waited until he saw the notification that they had formed the formation 'half-circle' then he shouted "Minsc, Cleave!".

Minsc obeyed instantly, his sword disengaging from blocking a blow from one xvert and flashing around in a massive arc, which hewed the heads off of three xvarts, as he shouted out "AH, hat trick! Most excellent, that will gain me much fame back in Rashemon when we return!"

But then Harry was grabbing his arm, and dragging him down and backwards, once more shouting out in a voice as loud as any Ranger, "now!"

From the bard and from the wizard came tongues of flame, which impacted the entrance, searing and setting on fire several dozen Xvarts, causing more than just those who had been set on fire to break, fleeing back into the cavern. "Bah, a hat trick you say, then what would you say about that, hmm? Magic rules, and the rest of you can only bemoan your impotence," Edwin snarked.

"Minsc, Khalid, with me!" Harry ordered, hopping to his feet as he raced into the cavern. "We have to keep up the momentum. The rest of you wait here."

Edwin blinked at that, cocking one perfectly manicured, if currently wet, eyebrow. "Does he truly believe that he will not need the aid of our spells and weapons?" *Well, if he does, then I suppose he is not nearly as intelligent as I had hoped he would prove after coming up with such of plans as before.*

Of course, Jaheira didn't reply to that one, simply shrugging her shoulders and saying, "I have come to have faith in Harry's abilities, and besides," she said gesturing down the trail to where they could see Imoen racing back towards them, her Hide in Shadows technique being

turned off as they she came into sight, "I believe he had other reasons in mind for keeping us out here..."

"Patrol of xvarts incoming, and I think behind them we've got another gnoll twosome."

"Then they must have dealt with my creatures. Pity. Still, let us set up an ambush quickly," Jaheira replied, taking command quickly. None of the others, even Edwin bothered to argue, though his sneer was visible under his cowl as he passed the druid by despite the rain.

Inside the cave, were six xvart elite, and twenty-eight other Xvarts along with seven more who had rushed back inside. They would have been more than enough to deal with three Adventurers of low rank as Harry and his two companions were even if it would have been a pyrrhic victory. But Harry didn't intend to fight them in a straight up battle. Just like Imoen he had their Blood Magic spells. And he had a lot more health to use before becoming worried about its effect. "Bombarda! Stupefy! Expeliarmus!"

The firsts spell he tossed had hit four of the xvart elites who had been crowded around one another, exploding them in an impressive display of blood and viscera. The second two spells had knocked all of the remaining Xvarts off of their feet, stunning many of the normal Xvarts. The two remaining Xvart elites were able to push themselves to their feet just in time to meet Khalid, who cut them down with ease.

The others were killed before they could regain their feet, leaving the three warriors to look at the Heart Stone as it slowly rose out of the center of the cavern's floor. "The last time I destroyed one in the other cave," he said to Khalid, grateful for the moment to be able to speak to him openly without Edwin or Garrick around between munching on some health berries. "We instantly reset the respawn point for the entire tower. And we were jumped by those gnolls from behind."

"I see. And you are afraid that doing so now will summon more?"

"I know it will," Harry said with a shrug. "My Advanced Adventurer System is guiding me in how to fight these dungeons, and..."

"So we a, a, are in a dungeon! I had t, t, thought we might be, b, b, but the fact that y, y, you were told we were in a d, d, dungeon, is amazing," Khalid explained.

"And you're not in surprised by the crystal?"

"No, I have b, b, been in enough dungeon dives to k, k, know what a Heart Stone looks like. Ho, ho, how many are there? Did you're a, a, advanced Adventurer sy, sy, system tell you that? That's always the question. T, t, that and the Dungeon Boss." Khalid shuddered. "Dun, d, dungeon bosses are always t, tr, tricky."

"There is a Dungeon Boss, and there are three remaining including this one. One Xvart, two gnoll."

“T, t, the last time, it respawned eight gnolls,” Khalid mused. “This time if w, w, we destroy it that may be d, d, doubled. As you destroy the heart stones, the immediate respawn you s, s, see will often be larger, but t, t, the respawn rate will always sl, sl, slower.”

“It’s a trade-off then, an immediate negative balanced against a long-term positive,” Harry thought aloud. “And the monsters who come from the nearest respawn points will move directly to the position of the destroyed heart stone.”

“Exactly,” Khalid said with a nod, smiling internally that Harry was picking up tactics and long-term thinking very well. *His leadership talent obviously has massive benefits.*

“Hmm... okay then. I think we can work with that.”

The two of them kept talking for a time, having been unable to before this, with Khalid telling Harry in his halting manner of past dungeon battles he’d been involved in. Many of them had not succeeded due to lack of information and supplies, making the AAS a magnificent gift to him, though Khalid and Jaheira had stayed away from such dangers since the debacle with the vampire. He also warned Harry to keep up the idea of stopping word of their attacks from spreading. They could not afford the Dungeon Boss becoming aware of them, or else they would just be swamped with enemies.

They left the cave and informed the others of what they had found. Edwin blinked at the knowledge that Harry and Minsc had together destroyed a heart stone, smirking at the idea of them putting forth so much effort into something that he could do with a single spell. “And you wish me to destroy this new heart stone, while the rest of you prepare a trap for the respawned enemies. An excellent use of my talents I suppose.”

With Edwin cavern, inside, that left the rest to prepare, which they did, with Imoen leading them back down the trail to where Harry wanted to set up their ambush. At the same time, Harry handed out more arrows to the archers, while Imoen put down the trap Harry had asked her to.

The position he had chosen for the ambush was a place where the passage split off into three directions excluding the one which led back to the manmade stairs up the side of the mound. Two of them lead to dead ends, which Imoen had explored. She and Minsc hid themselves down them now, covered in their Hide in Shadows technique. Harry, Khalid, Garrick, and Jaheira waited along the trail leading to the second heart stone.

They had barely finished when Harry received the notification:

A traveling companion or temporary ally of yours has destroyed a heart stone. Respawn rates have been reset. Note: Respawn rates are now up to 2 ½ hours.

Almost immediately on the heels of those words however, there came the barking cry of gnolls talking to one another, coming through the rain. And Harry’s map updated itself with not eight, but fourteen red dots, all moving along the trail towards them.

“Get ready,” Harry said, as Edwin exited the cavern from behind moving towards them.

When he came within sight, Harry nodded to him, and the mage sent him a supercilious sneer, wiggling his fingers. “It only took me one scorcher spell to destroy it, truly, those of you who are limited to mere brute force are so helpless without those of us who are able to call upon the greater mystery, magic.”

With an eye roll, Harry gestured Edwin into position.

The trap activated, as Harry watched, catching the gnolls one after another. “Jaheira, now.”

Jaheira cast Tangling Vines, which instantly captured the rest of the patrol, and the other Adventurers around Harry began to attack from long range. The trapped gnolls were easy meat for a time, with three of their number falling quickly. However, the Gnolls were able to find their feet more easily than the xvarts, pushing themselves to their feet and charging on through the vines. Within a few minutes, the fighters had to switch back to hand-to-hand weapons.

At the front of the battle, Harry and Khalid were pushed back by the initial rush, five of them breaking out of the trap at the same time hurling themselves forward, using their momentum to push the three warriors back with their halberds. But one of them died almost a second later to Khalid’s flashing blade, taking him in the throat and opening it, blood spurting to join the rain pelting down all around them.

Harry’s tower shield took several hits, defending him from the enemy, and he was nearly smashed off his feet almost entirely by a lucky shot that took him in the shoulder knocking him off-balance. But he recovered enough and stabbed desperately as he was twirled in place from the force of the initial blow.

He caught his enemy on the leg, causing the gnoll to fall backwards, letting Harry regain his footing. The next second, an arrow and slingstone slammed into that gnoll’s chest, sending him falling backwards.

The battle was fast and furious for a few minutes, and got worse when a patrol of not two, but six more gnolls appeared at the back of the battle charging forward. By that point, the grease trap had been all used up, and this force hammered into the Tangling Vines. It stopped two of them, but the other four joined up with three more who had been able to get through the vines, which were now dissipating.

However even as it did, Harry was thinking about where these enemies had come from. *Another patrol, yes, but six? If each patrol is going to be larger than the last, we’re missing a few.*

“Minsc, now!” Harry shouted to be heard over the sound of the fight and the ongoing rain. “Imoen, head back down the trail, we might have two more gnolls out there! Press forward, Cleave on three,” said in a lower tone to Khalid.

At the count of three, he and Khalid used the skill that the two of them had gotten from Minsc when Minsc had joined his party. The enemy in front of Harry fell, cut in two, while Khalid’s opponent simply fell to his knees with a low keening scream, his arms cut off at the wrist.

Behind the battle, Minsc had also charged forward, cutting his own enemy in half and the arm off the next one in line. Then with a roar he bodily checked into the next group of gnolls. They were still tangled up and two of them fell back into more enemies. The last few on their feet were able to get in a few hits on Khalid and Harry, but they were still caught between Minsc and the two warriors, unable to move to let the others get to their feet, while their legs and bodies stopped them from using their halberds.

At the same time Imoen moved around the battle once more pulling Hide in Shadows over herself. Racing back down the way they’d come Imoen quickly realized that Harry had been right. There were two gnolls waiting just out of sight, already turning as she raced forward. Imoen shot at them as she ran forward, but her aim was ruined by the rain and because she was moving at the time. If anything, her arrow whizzing past it made one of the monsters move faster. *No help for it* she thought, lashing out with a Stupefy.

The red beam of flashed through the rain, catching both gnolls in the back, tossing them forward. The next second, Imoen was on them. A simple stab into their necks and both died.

She crouched there, waiting for the cool down time on her Hide in Shadows to end before pulling it around herself once more, staring upwards the path leading further up to the fortress. After a moment she breathed a sigh of relief, then, chewing on some more of the healing berries then used a Leviosa spell on the two dead bodies, tossing them off the side of the cliff before moving back to the others.

By that point, the last of the gnolls fallen and the group had come together moving back to the second cave, even Jaheira wishful to get out of the rain. Joining them Imoen reported on what she found before quickly searching through the second cavern, while the others rested, pulling out some beef jerky or berries to eat, Edwin scowling all the while as he tore into some of the jerky. “I would be saying something along the lines of ‘so far so good’ given how many of these creatures we have slain and the fact we have destroyed two Heart Stones. And yet, we have yet to even reach the fortress itself.”

“That might actually be a good sign, perhaps most of their forces are stationed outside for various reasons,” Harry said thoughtfully. “At least we won’t be facing more Xvarts, or possibly anything but gnolls for a while. They are tough, true, but not intelligent or numerous enough to cause us issues so far.”

Harry idly identified six more short sword +1s that Imoen handed him, stuffing them into his Item Box. Those would fetch a nice price once they returned to civilization. They'd yet to find anything else worth their while.

That ended abruptly when Imoen pulled out two potions some kind, handing them over to Harry to be identified. The chest had looked as if the xvarts had been trying to break into it without breaking whatever was inside, but the lock on it had been easy for Imoen to pick.

Harry took them and his high intelligence and wisdom scores allowed him to identify them easily. "One is a Potion of Healing," he held it up, "+12 health points. Minsc, I think that will go to you. You're the only one of us who doesn't routinely use a shield in close combat."

Minsc took it gratefully, putting it not in his item box but on his belt. That would be even faster to find after all.

"The second one is a potion of invisibility. I think I'll keep that one for now," Harry murmured, putting it into his item box.

After that, the group stayed silent for a time, simply sitting around the fire that the xvarts in the cavern had been using, resting for a time before Harry should stand up, and gestured them all out. "Come on. We have a Witch to save after all. And we want to hit the next Heart Stone before the gnolls respawn."

"Yes! More butt kicking for goodness. Right, Boo?" Minsc shouted, to which Boo squeaked some response as it climbed up to his shoulder once more.

"Minsc, has anyone told you about using an indoor voice?" Jaheira asked.

"Minsc has heard the term before, but truly there are few buildings indeed which can encompass the magnificence that is Boo! Let alone this poor Ranger."

Garrick chuckled, then looked over at Harry. "My lyre's strings are not happy with the weather. You want me to start a Song now?"

"How many more do you have?"

"Four more," Garrick replied promptly.

Harry shook his head. "Best to wait on it. Now, let's get a move on."

When they reached the crossway, Harry had Imoen put down one large-scale grease trap that covered the entire area, as well as numerous other smaller ones. "Just in case," he supplied looking over at the others. With that done though, Minsc and Imoen once more took the lead, with Harry and Khalid behind them at a fair distance, nearly but not quite invisible to the two scouts thanks to the rain.

The two scouts soon reached a second crossway, where Minsc remained just below the leave of the junction, watching a group of eight gnolls sitting around a fire. They had a large tarp over them and the fire, held in place by X shaped pieces of wood at either edge of the rectangular-shaped tarp.

Imoen snuck past easily, moving down the walkway until it started to ascend once more in a series of wide steps leading upward. *This has to be the main way up to the fortress. The most well-guarded way. As Harry would say, nope.* With that in mind, she turned back, and turned to the north, moving around the 'front' of the fortress, noting where it rose up out of the stone about two stories above her, the walls adding another four stories at the least. *No way any of us could climb that, even if I transfigured a few ropes and 'found them' for us.*

She kept on exploring up and around, intent on seeing where else the trail went. Soon Imoen found another place where the trail split, one portion going down, the other, going up. At that point she decided that she'd seen enough. *Time to head back to the others.*

Soon she and Minsc were back with the others, reporting what they'd found. "I didn't go too far up the steps, but I think there could be another way around it, maybe a way to rappel down from on high. Regardless, we're still too far away from the fortress walls for anything up there to hear whatever happens at the intersection."

"In that case, second verse same as the first," Harry said with a chuckle. "You two get behind them, prepare to backstab or warn us of incoming patrols." His eyes briefly flicked up to glance at a timer that had begun to impede on his thoughts. *We should still have eight more minutes on the next patrol, and an hour and a half before the next full respawn, unless of course we destroyed more heart stones before that. I find it grossly unfair that they reset the response time whenever we do that!* "Beyond that, shock and awe, fast and dirty people."

The next battle was indeed quick and brutal. In a flash of inspiration that won her an intelligence point Imoen cut the two poles holding up the edges of the large tarp, one after the other, the tarp impeding the Gnolls while Harry and Khalid led the charge up onto the platform. Like Harry, Imoen had learned one of the first rules of combat: In combat, playing nice doesn't give you anything.

"Alas," Edwin muttered, as he ascended to the platform to, twirling his sling slightly. He hadn't needed to toss more than five stones before the fight was over. "If only there wasn't so much rain, we could truly play with fire. Underneath a tarp like that, they would've made perfect targets."

"They wouldn't be underneath the tent if it wasn't raining," Harry shrugged philosophically. "Now grab a leg Edwin, let's get these bodies off the trails."

Imoen and Minsc took the lead again, expanding Harry's map outward and around once more while the others waited where the pathway broke in two. Harry noted that the portion of the path the two scouts were following seemed to wind up higher into a portion of the crag

that was even higher than the rest but was also tapering off and becoming rockier too. At the same time, the path to their right went down and around the edge of the stone foundation of the fortress, steeper than the one they'd been climbing up. In fact, Harry estimated it would probably halt right at the top of the ocean level.

"Any idea what could be down there?"

Jaheira scowled as she stared down the path, and not just because they had to due to the angle of the passage leading down to the ocean, but also because the rain had once more picked up, and now it was buffeting them with heavy winds, so heavy they were having trouble taking headway up from the last standing. "Gnolls are not known for being a seafaring race, in fact, they rarely if ever willingly go on boats at all."

"But there could be a few down there?" Harry asked. When Jaheira nodded, he sighed. Then his eyes flicked sideways a little to the timer to the next patrols, and once more Harry decided to split their party.. "All right, let's head down there than." He still had another hour before the next mass respawn. "Imoen, Minsc, head back down until you're right on top of the second landing and ambush the next patrol as they come down the steps. If I'm right, you should only have about another minute and a half to wait. Jaheira, if you could summon up some more creatures to help them?"

"You have been timing them then?" Jaheira asked quizzically.

Edwin too also looked amused at the prospect. "And what makes you think creatures such as these would be able to keep to a timing schedule?"

"I think being inside a dungeon like this makes events like that occur on a timetable," Harry said slowly, working out how to put it in his mind without giving away his abilities. "And patrols aren't respawn points, they'd be on a separate schedule as you put it."

Edwin nodded slightly as that made sense, but behind his eyes, he was thinking things through. There had been a few times during the fighting, especially right before the battles began where Harry was just a little too confident as to what they'd face, a little too certain of what Imoen had reported.

You have earned +100 respect, -10 trust from Edwin. Something is going on in that wizards mind, something you might wish to be aware of going forward.

Thinking that a problem for the future Harry shrugged that notice away and led the remainder of the party down along the steep pathway. It twisted twice around the side of the rock jutting out from the ocean, until they arrived at the docks. There they found an actually decently covered area, with a heavy wooden roof over what looked like a fishing spot. Several dozen fishing poles with long lines were thrust into holders along the edge of a stone quay. Several hundred fish were drying out to one side, and others were stuck on poles over a large fire that was set in the center of the area.

There were also four Flinds. The stronger, more durable, and tougher type of gnoll with their better senses turned as one when Harry came down the steps, then roared and charged out into the rain, their halberds, heavier and larger than those of the normal gnolls, flashing towards Harry and Khalid.

“Crap!” If it wasn’t for his tower shield that charge might well have smashed Harry off the pathway into the ocean. As it was he teetered on the brink while Khalid was knocked backwards, his shield having taken two hits from the Flinds, as another one tried to go over his shield, the halberd’s head cracking into his armored chest.

Harry righted himself and brought his shield up in time to block the next thrust, while behind him, Jaheira and the others all released a volley. Garrick’s arrow hit one of the Flinds in the side of the head, taking out its ear but doing no real damage despite making it flinch. The sling stones however just bounced off their armor, not slowing the Flinds down at all. Worse, the Flinds were intelligent enough, that the one who had been fighting Harry twisted around and pushed Khalid to one side, getting in between Harry and Khalid and moving through them towards the others while the three remaining Flinds kept the two of them engaged.

“Nature’s call!” Jaheira shouted, and a lightning bolt flashed, smashing that Flind from on high, causing it to stagger.

The next instant an arrow flew from Garrick, catching it on the side of the neck causing it to cry out in pain. But it still swung its halberd, smashing Garrick off his feet and back into Jaheira, both of them going down in a heap.

“As always, it is up to the mage to save the day!” Edwin snorted, and lashed out with a Shocking Grasp, which finished that Flind off, causing it to shudder and collapse spasming on the steps as the electricity of the spell finished it off.

Meanwhile Khalid had dispatched one of the others, his sword taking it in the back of the knee, then his shield bashing its nose in, before blinding it with a cut on the forehead. Harry knew from experience that kind of thing was deadly in battle, and Khalid proved to the second later as he dodged a blow from the last Flind and stabbed the injured one straight through the chest. He overextended to do so however if only very slightly, and a Flind’s return blow nearly took his head off. But he ducked under it, and the halberd slammed into the side of the cliff face, causing a welter of sparks.

For his part, Harry repeatedly stabbed his own enemy, then used Cleave, cutting its leg off before kicking it off the side of the stairs into the ocean. A second after that he stabbed the last one in the back, and Jaheira sent a point blank slingstone right into its face, finishing it off.

“...Well, on the one hand I’m glad that we came down here now, when we were still in fighting shape rather than after we’ve cleared the fortress and think leaving will be smooth sailing,” Harry gasped, leaning on his blade its tip stuck in the rock beneath. “On the other

hand, I really hope there aren't many Flinds like that inside." The speed and strength of the Flind was just on a whole other level from regular gnolls or even gnolls Elites.

"Agreed," Jaheira said moving over to heal Khalid with one of her healing spells before Harry could stop her.

Harry himself simply popped in a few more healing berries, before looking at the patrol timer. Getting down here had cost them a few minutes, and the fight had cost them another few minutes so the patrol timer had reset without him noticing and was now reading fourteen minutes. *More than enough time to get inside the keep, I hope.* "Let's get a move on and meet up with Minsc and Imoen."

The two of them met the somewhat more battered group at the place where the path diverged, where Imoen took one look at them and instantly asked, "What the heck happened to you?"

"Four Flinds in close combat before we could really realize what we were facing," Harry replied dryly. "I do hope we didn't make you wait long?"

His sister from another mum chuckled, pointing towards the doorway. "We dealt with the patrol, it was another small one this time, two gnolls, easy meat for me, Minsc and the animals Jaheira summoned. I then headed up the path further. It doesn't lead anywhere helpful unfortunately, just a dead end at the bottom of one of those circle towers." *If Harry and I could use our spells more freely that wouldn't be the case but as it is, that's not happening.*

"Damn. That means we'll need to come through the front. Not good." Harry grouched, then shook his head. "Well, whatever, we can't change facts. So let's get a move on troops." *We still have forty-five minutes to the next respawn time, but even so I don't want to take chances.*

Edwin scowled and muttered something about being called 'troop' under his breath, but the others simply fell in line, with Imoen once more going first. And it was a good thing she did, because as she ascended up the steps leading to the front of the keep she did find several traps. Simple ones they were just tripwires attached to heavy bear traps here and there and she took them apart quickly and waved them on.

In the same formation as before, the group headed up the stairs finding that the steps turned to the left at a platform, covered with still more traps. From there, while the others waited behind them, Imoen and Minsc moved further up the stairs. The two of them found themselves at the entrance to what had to be the parade ground of the keep. There was a massive fire pit to one side, centered in circular outcrop of the open area. A few makeshift tents were set up here and there toward the keep of the fortress. On the other side of where they had entered, another set of stairs lead downwards while behind the tents there was a door leading into the keep proper. To one side, there was another staircase heading up to the top of the keep, the stairs covered with rubble.

And everywhere there were gnolls. Thirty-two regular gnolls were scattered around the place, with eight gnoll elites among them, and two Flinds. The two Flinds were together near the doorway, apparently having an argument, if the way Imoen reported they were gesturing and snarling at one another was any indication. But the rest, mostly around the fireplace, or sitting in the tents.

And one of those tents is probably going to be a respawn point, Harry's thought, his heart sinking as Imoen finished her report. That was a lot of enemies, especially given the fact that he and Imoen couldn't use their Blood Magic in front of Edwin. I am seriously beginning to have second thoughts about talking him into joining forces. He's been a powerful addition not the crew, but his magic just isn't as versatile as that from our homeworld.

The others too were all exchanging worried glances, and Harry realized he had to get their mind off it quickly. He clapped his hands together hard, nodding his head. "Okay, it's not exactly what we were hoping to expect, but we still have a few positives here. We still have almost all of the supplies that we got from the mother dryad, which means those not in hand-to-hand combat can heal themselves if they need to. Jaheira, you still have nearly all of your healing spells, I'll rely on you to use them at your own discretion."

"Oh thank you oh omnipresent authority figure," Jaheira said, but she was smiling as she said it understanding what Harry was trying to do. This kind of fight was going to be very tough, even if one of those tents didn't turn out to be a Heart Stone."

"Second, Imoen how many more grease traps to have?"

"Three more grease traps, fourteen different small wound type traps. However, there's a lot of them right near the top of the staircase," Imoen warned. "If I put down traps, they might spot me." There was always a chance of a thief being spotted making traps, the percentage of chance effected both by the thief's level and his or her skill with traps.

"Okay, let's do something different. Instead of attacking again, we're going to lure them into a field of traps. We'll fall back to that platform just now, while you lay down the traps. Garrick and Imoen will then charge forward and launch some arrows at the gnolls get them riled up and chasing you. Then act as if you didn't know what you were facing, all shocked at their numbers or something."

"Gnolls are not big thinkers, they will not wonder about the enemies we have already dealt with, this is true," Edwin murmured. "But I have to warn you, numbers like that can mean that we won't be able to make all of them come down into our traps. We might eventually have to fight them out in the open up there, where their numbers will begin to tell quickly."

Harry glanced over at Minsc. "If that happens, Minsc, you break out that halberd we took from that talkative gnoll, the Chesley Crusher. And then go berserk."

Minsc grinned, showing all of his teeth which somehow still flashed *ting* despite the rain. "Minsc believes this is a most excellent plan, as does Boo!"

"We also have my remaining summoning spells, these two and Edwin's in a pinch," Jaheira interjected, gesturing at the two dire wolves she had conjured to help Imoen and Minsc ambush the latest patrol. "I realize we have been husbanding Edwin's more powerful creatures, but that kind fight is the perfect time to use them."

Harry nodded at that, then glanced over at Imoen, moving over to pat her on the back as he asked "do you think you're up for it? And, if you have to," he whispered in a lower tone, unseen by any thanks to the rain "don't hesitate to use your spells just in case. We can always deal with Edwin somehow later."

As Imoen was working on the traps, the others readied themselves, once more using wax on their bowstring's, eating some jerky and so forth. For his part Harry replaced his sword with another one, in no mood to have it shatter mid battle, while also glancing occasionally at the timer for the next mass respawn. They still had time. *And we've got those traps down there, that should slow them up anyway.*

When Imoen came back signaling they were ready, the others got into position while she led Garrick up the steps, where they paused, choosing out a target among the three gnolls near the top of the staircase leading out into the open area of the keep. She then pulled back her arrow on her bow, looking over at Garrick. "On three. One, two," she turned back, her eye staring along the shaft of her arrow as she shouted "Three!"

One longbow and one short bow fired as one, slamming into their chosen target. The damage was enough to kill the gnoll, and he fell back with a cry. The other two turned, roared a warning audible even through the rain, and then marched down the steps towards the two.

Two more fell, as Garrick and Imoen backed away, wasting four arrows in the doing. They then raced back up and saw that the rest of the Gnolls were already moving towards them. "Two arrows then away for you Garrick," Imoen said, firing off her own bow. A short bow could fire faster than a Longboat even if it didn't have nearly as much stopping power, so she could fire perhaps twice as many arrows in the same time frame.

This was proven as she launched five arrows while Garrick only shot twice, but only one of her arrows hit with enough damage to actually make a gnoll pause. Of Garrick's arrows one of them went wide of its target, but the other slammed into the chest of a gnoll causing it to gasp out, falling to its knees dropping its halberd and clasping at the arrow with both hands. Imoen twitched her next shot to that one, and got a critical hit, sending an arrow through its head to finish it off before turning and grabbing Garrick's arm. "Away! There's too many of them!"

"Right, we have to run, we have to get out of here!" Garrick replied, his voice carrying far better than Imoen's thanks to his training as a Bard. Which probably also had something to

do with how much he hammed it up, declaiming in terror-stricken tones, "I don't want to be meat for the stewpot! We need to get out, tell everyone about this place!"

Despite Imoen's impression of his acting though, the gnolls ate it up. With a mass howl the whole crowd of gnolls followed after them, the closest practically on their heels, while the others scrambled after them mindlessly, eager to be in on the kill.

The two of them moved quickly and expertly through the traps, and then past where the others were, as the traps behind them went off with the first of the Gnolls entering the area.

For a moment, most of the adventurers held their fire, unable to see up to the top of the short stairwell thanks to the rain. All Save Khalid and Jaheira, who could see thanks to their half-elf heritage. Three Gnolls fell to the married couple's expert shooting, and Harry laughed, clapping the man on the shoulder. "Damn fine shooting."

"O, onl, only fair, I'm afraid. The ra, range isn't enough to r, really challenge me, e, even with the rain," Khalid replied modestly.

Soon as the gnolls forged through the traps, Harry and the others opened fire on them with Garrick and Minsc using their longbows, and Harry his crossbow. But the rain made it difficult, the little red aiming iris his AAS gave him amazingly difficult to even see let alone hit. Thankfully the gnolls were so mashed together any shot could hit something. And they were so helpless at range that the Tactic, Killing Zone activated, helping the Adventurers along in their slaughter.

When the first few gnolls reached them, Harry waved Khalid and Minsc away moved forward, stabbing a few of the Gnolls that came closest through the grease trap. He fell to his knees at one point, but still stabbed downwards into the gnoll that had been his target before pushing backwards, watching as more came on.

What followed was several minutes of easy battle for the adventurers, as more of the front line gnolls got caught in the traps, stuck in place their feet in some traps, or simply slipping in the grease trap. But their numbers began to do away with the traps, even the grease trap move losing its efficacy. It was obvious to Harry and everyone else that the gnolls' numbers had been multiplied several times over.

Then the Gnolls were on the front line of the adventurers, with Khalid and the Minsc switching to melee weapons, joining Harry. The others spread out in a firing line behind them as Harry directed. This allowed Harry to activate a new formation.

You have created a formation: The Line formation (small scale, incomplete).

Though simple, a (semi)-shield wall backed by long range combatants can give you some protection against simple foes who attack you from the front.

Defensive +1/5th of each frontline warrior's base damage.

Attack +1/2 of each long range combatant's base damage.

The sheer number of gnolls were still getting in one another's way as they came down the stairs, but when the first few of them reached the front row warriors Harry realized he made a mistake. The added height from the steps allowed the back row of gnolls enough added height to be able to thrust over the shoulders of their fellows much easier, and Khalid nearly went down almost at once as he tried to duck under the blow of a gnoll in the first row. He took a blow to the side of the head, which rent his helmet, but the helmet stopped the blow enough that he survived it. He even was able to get in, and stab at the other one.

"Cleave, then in with them! Block their path, get underneath them, use their bodies to defend against the second row! Get up onto the stairs, don't let them push us back!" Harry shouted, instantly understanding he couldn't let the gnolls realize they had this tiny advantage.

Above them, the rain finally began to peter out, something all of them were glad to feel but the battle continued as Minsc and Khalid did what Harry had asked, all of them getting in underneath their opponent's guard, slicing the first row down before charging the rest, knocking the dead bodies out of the way to get in among the second group. They still kept their line, as Harry shouted more commands to that effect then added, "Edwin, Jaheira, Garrick spells free!"

Magic Missile after Magic Missile flashed forward, downing gnolls. Each of them could take two hits from the magic missiles before collapsing in bloody ruin, the magical bolts lashing unerringly into the target's head or chest. Edwin used that spell four times, killing eight gnolls while Jaheira called down lightning once, but then decided to conserve that spell for when the two Flinds joined the battle. Neither of the blue furred Flinds had rushed down the stairwell to attack.

Instead Jaheira concentrated on healing the front using a single Minor Healing spell of her own, and then using one of spells on her staff.

Jaheira has cast: Stinging Flies

This spell creates a swarm of stinging flying bugs. While it stings and annoys, it does no real damage. Yet it can certainly distract whatever enemies are caught in the radius of the spell.

Damage dealt: 1/10 of a hit point per 20 seconds.

Duration: Base 4 minutes plus 20 seconds per caster's level.

Several of the gnolls being stung began panic, trying to get away, entangling their fellows. The killing went on, as Harry, Khalid and Minsc forged their way forward, and the gnolls kept on coming down. Harry lost track of how many other words, the enemies just a mass of red his map, pressing in on the small group of green dots.

Soon, Edwin stopped casting Magic Missile, having run out of the spell he'd memorized the day before. He switched to Acid Arrows and Fire Arrow spells which were equally deadly, using each spell once. These spells resembled arrows made of the named element and could do as much damage in a single hit as five magic missiles. They were overkill against most gnolls, so he targeted the odd elite hidden amongst the lower ranking troops. Once had had done that however, Edwin was forced to fall back on his sling.

During this time, the front line of the gnolls began to all panic thanks to the damage they were taking and the stinging bugs, and Harry decided to shift tactics. "Back up! Jaheira, Tangling Vines. Everyone else, shift to long range weapons!"

The spell struck, capturing the entire upper portion of the stairs in its area of effect, and trapping fourteen regular gnolls and three elites. At first only a few were trapped but between that and the ones who had panicked, none of the gnolls could get to Harry and the others.

However, as the final gnolls near the top of the stairs fell back into the area above them, Harry chanced to glance at the time winced. *Seven minutes remaining before the next respawn. I hope those traps we left behind us work.*

But Harry couldn't concentrate on that right now and he knew it. They couldn't allow the two Flinds to simply wait until they had sufficient numbers to swamp them while also being attacked from behind by the patrols. Attacking from both sides the gnolls could overcome the adventurers. Or conversely, the Flinds could just retreat into the fortress and warn the rest of the dungeon, which would obviously then just overwhelm them entirely. "Form up! Formation Hammer Time! Garrick, I want songs of Regeneration and Courage again."

"Those are the last two spells I have," Garrick warned.

"I know, but it's do or die time. We take the parade ground and hold the entrance, and maybe we can stop the enemy from respawning at all. But to do that we need to take out the enemies waiting for us up there. Or else we'll just be forced to fight both them and the group behind us once they are respawned."

Garrick grimaced but didn't argue the point, looking even younger than his real age for a moment. Harry spent a second gripping his shoulder, trying to instill some bravery in the other young man who obliged him by pulling his lyre off his back and singing the small couplets that activated his last two Bardic spells.

Harry waited for him to finish before giving out more orders. "Edwin and Garrick. Once we're up there I want you to fire your Fireball and Grease spells towards the tents to our right. Then Jaheira and Edwin will concentrate on summoning spells while Garrick switched to bow and arrow. The rest of us will take them at the run."

“Yes!” Minsc roared, thrusting his massive Claymore into the sky that made Harry very glad the storm had passed because he was certainly the tallest that’ll object and area at the moment. “Let us move on! For my Witch, for goodness!”

“You heard the man,” Harry said, placing Khalid in the center of the three of them, as the others formed a single line behind him. Harry put himself on the side which would be closest to the tents when they reached the parade ground.

The same message as before popped up although this time, Harry noticed that the efficacy of the Formation was barely worth it, adding only 1/10th to the damage they could deal. Just like the information announcement had warned, formations lost their impact in a dungeon over time. *Damn, that comes into effect even if no one we’ve faced with it has survived to bring word? I call that ruddy cheating.*

That didn’t stop him however from leading the charge up the steps. They had to keep the momentum, or else this whole dungeon would turn against them. It was only the basic mechanics of the dungeon that had so far stopped that from happening already, given the fact their current enemies were squatting right outside the fortress where the rest of them were housed. *At least I think it is. Cocking fog of war.* Without someone up on the parade ground, Harry had lost his ability to see whatever was going on up there.

Two Gnolls were standing near the top of the stairs and they barked out warnings before the three warriors slammed into the bodily, knocking their halberds to one side, and then pushing them out of the way, stabbing with their swords. The two gnolls fell, and the charge continued into the nearest clump of Gnolls, which had congregated around the fire.

It was at that point however when Harry realized he had miscalculated. Like the two Xvart Heart Stones the one here in the tents could respawn enemies once the area around it came under attack. It had done so during the fight on the steps, possibly several times, and the Flinds had kept back the majority of the gnolls it had created. Further they had split them up, keeping the groups in two large clumps, one by the fire pit, the rest by the tents.

As the ‘hammer’ twisted in that direction, Edwin and Garrick turned their own attention to the other side of the parade ground. They launched their spells towards the tents, and with the rain having stopped, the two spells went off without a hitch.

First the grease spell hit, spreading like a miasma around the area, covering every tent, the wet cobblestones and every gnoll within sixty feet of the impact point. Then the fireball struck, exploding all over the area, causing damage to the more than a dozen gnolls and the two Flinds standing there while also setting the grease on fire. Three of the gnolls died, while several others became panicked, rolling on the wet cobblestone to put out the fires which had started in their fur.

Then Edwin and Jaheira were both concentrating, summoning their creatures into being between them and the group of gnolls around the tents. That group multiplied as the magic

users watched, but by that point, four dire wolves were attacking, along with two ogres as Harry and the others pushed into the rest of the group around the firepit. Several of them stumbled back and fell into the firepit, while Harry and the others cut still more down. "Finish them off," Harry shouted. "Khalid, Minsc, finish this group off! Imoen and the other long range fighters keep firing at the group around the tents!"

Unfortunately, as Harry had feared, the open area of the parade ground was too large for the summons to fully cover the flank of the Jaheira and the others. The gnolls around the tents led by the Flinds began to envelop the line of summoned creatures, sending several of them towards the magic users. At the same time, the group around the firepit recoiled, spreading out and away before coming back in, doing much the same thing as their fellows, attempting to envelop the head of the 'hammer'. Soon all of the Adventurers were being pressed back hard.

In an effort to shield the two spellcasters, Garrick and Imoen moved in front of Jaheira and Edwin to face the gnolls that coming towards them after skirting around the summoned creatures. But it quickly became apparent that neither of them were up to facing five times their number of gnolls in hand-to-hand combat. Even with Garrick's songs stirring their muscles, they just couldn't do enough damage in this kind of furious me. One on one they'd still win of course, maybe even two on one. Three or four on one, that just wasn't going to happen, and both of them started to take hits almost instantly.

Jaheira and Edwin did their best to help the two, while Harry and the others desperately tried to finish off the enemies around the fire. But the Flinds had proven smarter than Harry had thought, and the enemies on the right of the battlefield had begun to move around the encircled summoned beasts in strength. Those beasts were still blocking many and had killed several of the gnolls, but the Flinds were too smart to let them bog down more than their share of the gnolls.

And as Harry tried to think of what to do while dodging and blocking blows from his own immediate enemies, one of the Flinds reached the front of the battlefield. Imoen had barely a moment to pull her blade out of the side of a gnoll before she was smashed off her feet crying out in pain as her arm broke under a blow she barely saw coming.

Critical hit! Imoen has taken 25 damage. Her arm is broken.

This is a long-term wound that impairs Imoen, giving her the status, Crippled. Imoen will no longer be able to use her arm until it is healed by a spellcaster.

Harry, ducking under a halberd blow, lashing as he did out with a kick that caught the gnoll in the side of the knee. It felt screaming and Harry was scrambling back towards the others shouting out over his shoulder "Minsc, berserker mode! Khalid with me!"

Instantly Minsc dropped his claymore, not even bothering to put it back into his item box as he pulled out the halberd the Chesley Crusher, which was a + 6 for anyone with 36 or

more strength, as Minsc would have once he entered his berserk state. Then he roared, a thunderous bellow that put Harry in mind of a lion in comparison to the hyena bleating of the Gnolls all around them. "Face the might of Minsc and Boo, evil! **GRRRAAAAAA!!!!!!**"

Minsc has activated the Barbarian technique, Berserker!

Minsc has gained immunity to all mental attacks. Minsc has gained plus 40 to strength and constitution.

Minsc is now Enraged. He can no longer tell friend from foe, and only the ability fading after an hour or his death can knock him out of it.

The gnolls around Minsc recoiled and his halberd smashed theirs to pieces, his return blows cutting their bodies in two, blood and viscera literally exploding in every direction as he howled and roared and laughed maniacally. Thanks to his berserker strength the speed penalty of the Chesley Crusher didn't come into effect, and the extra damage it caused was frankly insane, setting aside Minsc's immense strength and berserk ability to ignore damage.

With that aspect of the fight under control, Harry shouted out further commands, ordering Garrick to grab Imoen and retreat back to the top of the stair, as he barreled between Jaheira and Edwin into the Flind that had broken Imoen's arm as it strode towards them. The Flind turned and took his charge with its halberd in defensive position and Harry ground to a halt before he was pushed backward off-balance.

The Flind then twirled its halberd, coming down with an overhand blow that Harry couldn't dodge. His shield did its best, blocking the blow, but ten of its durability went with it, and the Flind then kicked out at Harry, catching him in the chest.

That was a move no other gnoll had done before, and it completely surprised Harry, nearly putting him on his rear. He stumbled back again, only saved by Khalid stepping forward to block the Flind's next blow. Regaining his feet Harry brought his sword around in a massive attack, shouting out, "Cleave!" as he hacked at the Flind's side.

The attack did its work, and his sword found itself buried halfway through the Flind, doing more than enough damage to kill the creature. However Harry's blade was now caught, and he twisted away quickly, pulling out another sword. This one was the one unfortunately that he had been using all day. Still, two more Gnolls died before it shattered in his grip.

He grabbed out a third sword from his Item Box, grateful that he'd bought two back in the last town they'd been in. Despite that, this was his last sword, and Harry made a note to retrieve the one he'd left stuck in the flind's body. Regardless, Harry moved forward to help one of the ogres that Edwin had conjured into being, gesturing Khalid with him. Harry hoped that they could once more create a bulwark to protect their long rang fighters while Jaheira healed up Imoen's arm.

But three of the four dire wolves were down by this point, and more of the gnolls had worked around the far end of their line. There many of them had run into Minsc, who roared and shouted and screamed his defiance. He was like a rock now, slaughtering all enemies that got close.

Despite that, Harry and the remaining summoned monsters couldn't hold the line. The Gnolls were simply too numerous, pushing through and around them to attack Garrick, Imoen, Jaheira and Edwin. As the others pulled back for a moment, Jaheira laid out with her staff, blocking the blows of the halberds seeking her life.

Then Khalid was there, pulling back from the line, leaving Harry on his own along with one summoned wolf and one remaining ogre to form a triangle. Luckily, the summoned creatures obeyed his command to form that triangle, but Harry took several hard blows in the next few minutes the fight so furious Harry could no longer concentrate on the larger battle.

Yet that was next to nothing to the fight going on around Khalid.

The half-elves tried his best, he really did. But he couldn't defend all four of the others even as they tried to retreat back down the step, forcing them to once more come at him only a few at a time. But the steps were so wide Khalid couldn't cover them all, and Garrick had to step forward to help. This led to their first casualty.

Garrick's short sword stabbed into one gnoll having ducked under the blow from his halberd, but another gnoll moved around it rapidly, it's halberd flashing out to his side. Garrick was able to get his medium shield up in time to block the blow, but it pushed him off balance, and then a third gnoll attacked on his other side. Garrick tried to block the blow, but his sword shattered, and Garrick fell back, about to shout for help before the gnoll whose attack his shield had block stepped forward again.

It's halberd head caught him in the side, his leather armor, not stopping the blow at all, and he fell back crying in agony. Another blow silenced that cry and caved in his chest.

Imoen killed one of the three gnolls attacking Garrick with a well-placed arrow, her arm having been healed by Jaheira, who took out the other one with an overhand blow from her staff which shattered his skull. And Khalid killed the next two, as they continued to fall back around the firepit.

But Garrick's spell had died with him, the bonuses to strength and dexterity leaving all of the Adventurers. Now all bar Minsc were being pressed back hard, without any formation to help. Khalid fell with a cry, taking a blow to the shoulder, and another to the side. His armor turned the one on the side, leaving him with bruised ribs rather than a gash that would've ended his life, but his shoulder had cracked under the other blow, and his shield arm was now useless.

He felt fear rising from within him, but then Harry was there. The enemies had long since stopped spawning, and the last Flind had found its death against Harry's sword, although Harry had taken a hard knock to his leg killing him. With Edwin being pressed so hard further down the steps and no longer able to see him, Harry had taken a chance to use an Expeliarmus, knocking down the enemies around him. He'd left the last of the dire wolves – which had somehow survived to this point - and the still Berserk Minsc to finish them off, racing into the mass facing the rest of his party.

Critical hit, you have achieved backstab.

Critical hit you have achieved backstab.

The two messages flashed in front of Harry's eyes as he put down two more gnolls. This left only four trying to get past Khalid. Harry was also ecstatic to note that the Heart Stone had reached its spawning limit, and no more enemies had come out to join the fight for a few minutes.

At the same time Harry attacked them, Jaheira used one of her more powerful healing spells on her husband, healing his shield arm. Between the two of them and Imoen, who she had already healed, joining Jaheira and Edwin in long-range attacks, the last four gnolls fell quickly.

Harry blinked through several of the messages that had appeared in his head as the battle had continued, until he came to the one that he was most concerned about: The respawn time. It had passed and gone, but no enemies had appeared behind them. Yet. "Everyone stay away from Minsc for now. Edwin, destroy the Heart Stone. Everyone else, let's prepare to be attacked from below."

"What about Garrick?" Jaheira asked gesturing down to the young man's body. She felt remorse at his death of course, and sadness. But there was literally nothing they could do for him now. *I could have resurrected him if I were able to access all the spells available to a Druid of my true level rather than at this, this enfeebled version of myself I am stuck with, but as it is that is impossible.*

Harry knelt next to Garrick's form, leaning forward to close his eyes. "We'll deal with that after we deal with the enemies coming up at us from behind. Imoen?"

Without a word Imoen raced down the stairs, disappearing into her Hide in Shadows spell. Harry watched his map for a moment simply leaning his head back, staring up at the sky as if he were exhausted, which all of them were by this point. That fight had been far too fast and far too furious for anyone's liking.

What was to Harry's liking however was the fact that Imoen had passed the place where they'd found the gnolls hiding under a tarp from the rain and was now pushing to the north

then down towards where the Flind had been. None of the Flinds were alive thankfully. It was evident they were not connected to the respawn time of the rest of the dungeon's monsters.

The next second, as another message scrolled across his eyes about Edwin's destroying the Heart Stone, Imoen turned back, moving down the stairwell to renew a few more small traps. They were out of parts for the grease trap after the last battle, which was unfortunate, although the grease itself might still be useful to Harry's mind. And she eventually found a few gnolls – only four, coming up towards them. Imoen led them back, and the others, including Edwin who had rejoined them, pelted them from long range, all four falling quickly.

Once the fight was over Harry left the others, and moved up towards the parade ground, moving towards Minsc, who had finished hacking the unconscious gnolls to death. Harry downed several Healing Berries and then intoned, the cheering charm towards Minsc. The spell hit and Minsc began to blink, his eyes clearing. Harry held the spell on him until he dropped his weapon, then backed away out of hitting range and cancelled the charm.

Minsc groaned, holding his side which ached for many reasons at the moment, then his head, then his stomach then his head again. "Ooh, my head feels as if I decided to take part in the headbutting contest once more only to run into Snarl and his metal-clad forehead. What happened?"

"We won." Harry said bluntly looking around them. "Now come on." Harry then back towards the others with Minsc following, taking a last glance to the tent which had contained the heart stone.

He found the rest of his party surrounding Garrick's body, and knelt down, touching the man lightly. He then saw the notification;

You have found the body of the adventurer Garrick. Garrick is dead.

However, as his head is not been chopped off, or his heart pierced, or his brain damaged in any way beyond what already had been, a resurrection ritual or spell will enable him to come back to life. So long as his body remains in one piece.

Do you wish to add Garrick dead your item box?

Harry sighed, but then nodded his head slowly and reached out to the accept button which looked as if he'd just reached out a second hand to touch Garrick's chest. There was a brief flash of light, and the body disappeared.

You have accepted the quest: Revive Garrick.

Killed in the pursuit of a quest while in your company, Garrick the Bard is still able to be revived in the future. Take him to a temple or high level Druid or priest, and they will be able to see to the revivification.

Rewards: +200 Respect/Trust with Garrick.

Additional rewards vary.

Edwin's eyes widened. "You are able to add a dead body to your item box! Amazing," He stated making the deduction easily.

Harry grunted, but didn't reply, just turning and walking back up the steps, with Imoen skipping up the stairs ahead of them. As they walked, Harry examined each of them in turn. A little over half of the healing berries were gone by this point, Minsc having eaten almost all of his along with the health potion just now to get over the damage he'd taken under the control of his berserk fury. Harry had also eaten almost all of his, Imoen's nearly half of hers and Khalid a few.

Yet Jaheira still had four healing spells, one medium, one minor, plus a medium healing spell on her staff. Edwin had one Scorcher spell, one Fireball and a Protection from Normal Weapons scroll – a truly precious thing Edwin hadn't mentioned before this - remaining. He also had a single summoning spell left, whereas Jaheira had two, one from her staff, and one from her own reserve. She also had three Barkskin spells she had yet to use.

Imoen and Harry also had their Blood Magic, which was unlimited even if they were still constrained in when to use it thanks to Edwin being there. That, and the hit to their health each spell took.

"I pushed down that little walkway there but didn't find anything but another fire pit, and an old ballista pointing out to sea.," Imoen reported as she moved back to the rest of the group.

"Then we need to figure out where to go from here. Through the regular entrance, or climbing over those rocks and trying to see if we can get in from the top?"

"Up top," everyone said. Harry nodded, grateful for their unified solidarity.

He, Imoen and Minsc led the way with the others following. They didn't find any more enemies on the roof of the keep thankfully, save for a few rabid dogs which they easily put down. The barking didn't even bring any attention from below, thankfully. But Harry knew that another patrol was due to head out another ten minutes, and then the jig would be up whatever the weird mental mechanics the gnolls were working under. The rest of the guard posts being empty they'd understand, or at least not be as concerned about. The massive group of gnolls and two Flinds missing from the parade ground? That would spread the alarm far too quickly.

Still, we've got 2 ½ hours before the next respawn time too, and there really were fewer monsters this last time around. One more heart stone, and the Dungeon Boss. Then the dungeon will be 'cleared', Harry reflected.

On the roof of the keep the group split off into teams of two, until they found an entrance that would allow them back down to keep. The door was old and rotten and Minsc and Harry were able to pull the wood away, allowing them access.

Inside they found a spiral staircase heading down into the spiral until they came out into the top lore of the main keep. At the bottom, they found another doorway, which was locked. Imoen unlocked it after a few minutes, although she had to use her unlocking spell to do it, her first attempt to use her Thief's ability having failed. But that spell didn't cause any splash or anything visible and with Imoen intoning the spell directly into the lock, Edwin didn't notice anything.

They came out of the staircase into a hallway which looked like a noble's formal receiving room. It was a long, wide room, with several fires set here and there through it. There were a few flinds scattered around the fires, cooking something over them, while a few two more slept on the ground wherever they wished. In the center of the room was a small dais that held a single large chair, it's back to them.

Worse the instant they entered, a strange force rose behind them, pushing all of them through the doorway. Then the door clanged shut behind them as a message appeared in Harry's view once more.

You have entered the domain of the Dungeon Boss, Gnoll Chieftain Nashaka! You cannot leave until the Dungeon Boss is slain.

That clanging noise drew the attention of every gnoll in the room and the Chieftain rose from its chair, as did the Flinds, standing up and turning in their direction quickly. Normally six Flinds would be enough to grab Harry's attention all on their own, but next to the chieftain they paled into insignificance.

The chieftain was massive, at least two feet taller than the other gnolls, although he was a bit stoop-shouldered so this wasn't immediately apparent. His shoulders were wide, wider than even an ogre's. It wore what looked like a full plate armor made for it's body, even its legs and a helmet, out of which its ears jutted to either side, its eyes dull orange burning from within the depths of the helmet. It's halberd gleamed with some kind of inner light over the edge, and it's claws also gleamed like metal in the light of the fires. It also had a Health Bar in gleaming Red above it, a wide, red bar superimposed over the world which none of the other enemies they'd faced thus far had.

"Well cock," Harry growled, before shouting out commands. "Edwin Fireball then Summoning spell! Jaheira, Tangling Vines at the door and then the same before switching to defensive spells. Imoen, Vanish, Minsc and Khalid, press forward with me." By this point Harry was very conscious of the first rule of battle in this world: protect your mages and long range fighters. Let them do the killing for you.

Yet even as Harry was shouting, the new Groll Chieftain was also shouting out orders, while several more gnolls, elites all of them appeared around him three to a side.

Warning, Dungeon Boss has used passive summons. Every two minutes the Dungeon Boss will act as a respawn point, creating a group of randomly chosen warriors to defend it.

(Note: Higher Level Dungeon Bosses can summon elite troops every time, and even choose which kind occasionally depending on the basic intelligence level of the species the Dungeon Boss Represents.)

Edwin's fireball slammed into the center of the hall, killing two of the suddenly summoned gnolls and setting three of them alight, but the other one joined the rush front with the rest of the seven Flinds that had already been in the room. At the same time, the Dungeon Boss slammed his halberd into the ground shouting out at a command in its own language. A blast of light came towards Harry and the others, some kind of magical spell releasing along the ground towards them.

Dungeon Boss Nashaka has used arcing quake.

This attack goes around long the ground, causing people along the edge of it's attack radius to lose their feet, and in the direct line of attack to be electrocuted, causing one half the Intelligence points of the Dungeon Boss.

It is a Dungeon Boss special spell. Cooldown time: 7 Minutes

(Note: higher Level Dungeon Bosses can...)

That was as far as Harry could read before he had to concentrate on the incoming attack itself. In reply Harry slammed his shields down into the ground, hunkering down behind it as one hand pressed up against the inside of the tower shield, muttering out. "Protego!" just as the attack hit. He had timed it perfectly and even Jaheira and the others who knew about Harry's Blood Magic spells couldn't detect a difference between the blue-white light of the lightning aspect of Nashaka's attack, and the Protego on the shield.

At the same time, Jaheira finished casting Barkskin on her husband. As the battle continued she moved on to cast it on Minsc, thinking he would need it the most, then Harry and Imoen.

At the same time Harry cancelled the spell and hurled himself up and forward the instant the attack dissipated, racing towards the nearest Flinds. Behind them, the Dungeon Boss seemed to be startled at the way it's attack had failed on his shield, but now it marched towards him, and between one step and the next barreled forward like an out of control car.

Dungeon Boss has used Shoulder Charge.

Cooldown time: 2 Minutes.

Harry barely got his tower shield between them again thanks to his sword and shield technique coming into play, but he was smashed off of his feet and noticed the durability of his shield had taken one heck of a hammering, going down 40 points, leaving him with a little over half remaining. It had taken cumulative damage up to this point, the magic in it slowly eroding under constant low-level attacks.

He also lost his grip on his sword, but that was no matter, as Harry simply pulled out a second one from his item box. It was the last extra sword he had, but that was all right, and he danced around the next blow, then the next, his own sword flicking out. But the Dungeon Boss twisted its halberd, blocking the blows easily, the end of its shaft coming up, crashing into the bottom Harry's hastily interposed tower shield. The blow was strong enough to cause Harry to stagger back, while elsewhere in the room the rest of his friends were not having an easy time of it, something Harry could only take in at a glance.

Khalid had taken a slash to one forearm, which was bleeding slightly but not dangerously. Around it, his shield was also being battered into uselessness, while Minsc was being pushed backwards towards Edwin and Imoen. Edwin and Jaheira however were not engaged in hand to hand yet, and it was time to make certain that remained the case. "Summon monsters! Every summons spell you can!"

Without hesitation Edwin and Jaheira switched their spellcasting, and in the next moment, one ogre, and one Ent appeared there. In the next second two bears also appeared summoned up by one of the spells on Jaheira's druid staff. Massive Kodiak bears they roared with her fury, attacking the nearest people, who happened to be the gnolls, specifically a group of Flind.

They bore down three of them before the other gnoll could respond, their halberds hacking at the sides of the Bears, whose fur and fat actually worked as pretty decent armor against the slashing attacks from the Flinds favored. The bears, now thoroughly enraged, smashed the striking halberds to pieces, and barreled forward, their mighty jaws crunching, their paws crashing.

The Gnoll Chieftain however, brought Harry's attention back to him with a thump, as it leapt high, and slammed it's feet down again on the ground causing an earthquake.

Dungeon Boss has used Stomp.

This is a mid-to-low level Warrior skill that is also available for monsters.

Stomp creates a tremor in the ground, commensurate to the level of the user's Strength. All enemies around the user will need to either have a Dexterity of over 20 or make a saving throw or be knocked down.

Cooldown time: 3 minutes.

This was followed instantly by another few messages. Jaheira let loose a curse Harry would never have thought her capable of. The summoned creatures all staggered save the Ent. Edwin fell to his knees, and grabbed at something underneath his red cloak, his eyes wide in a suddenly frightened face. Of Harry's actual party members, Imoen and surprisingly Minsc had retained their feet, while Khalid and Harry did not.

Save roll Failed!

You have been knocked down.

And of course this meant that most of them took hits. Jaheira especially took several slashes before she could roll behind her husband's legs. Edwin didn't take much damage, but Khalid took a few hard knocks.

Harry too was now flat on the floor, rolling desperately as the Gnoll Chieftain slammed down its halberd. It was joined by several others, and only Imoen's appearing behind one and backstabbing him in the kidneys allowed Harry a moment to get to his feet. His tower shield interposed itself between Imoen and the next Flind, blocking his blow, as Harry pushed it out of the way, his sword flicking up into the Flind's chest.

By that point, Harry had noticed that he could tell the cool down times of the abilities that the Gnoll Chieftain was using, and knew he had three minutes before he could use that attack again, and even longer to use the other skill he'd shown.

He backed away, pulling out a throwing axes and hurling it at the Gnoll Chieftain. This was the first time he'd used that rather expensive weapon, but his skill with axes was enough to let him throw it with relative ease. The blow was accurate, catching the Chieftain in the chest, and pairing off a good 10 hit points from the health bar that Harry could see above it, the weapon disappearing in a flash of magical light and fury. The chieftain in turn staggered back retreating behind two of its guards and this allowed Harry to not only pull out his sword again, and cut into two more of the Gnoll, but also shout out more commands.

He and Khalid swiftly met up, protecting Jaheira and Edwin as they retreated into the corner of the room, Imoen once more disappearing under her Hide In Shadows to allow Minsc to join them. Once there, the two spell users used the last of their Summon spells, the summoned creatures they had already called forth being dead on the floor chopped to bloody offal. A cougar, two regular wolves, and another ogre appeared, roaring their fury as they attacked the gnolls, letting Minsc and Harry gained some more health from a few Health berries.

But the summon time for the Chieftain's automatic random respawn had also hit zero, and this time, six Flinds appeared. They all charged forward in groups of two to join those already in the room, showing an ability to work together and a dangerous level of skill as they attacked the summoned creatures.

“Edwin, concentrate on hurting the Chieftain. Everyone hurt him as much as possible at ranGE!”

Harry grunted, as his tower shield took a blow from one of the Flinds on its surface, the strength of it actually pushing Harry backwards. Luckily, these Flinds like the ones they already slain in the dungeon didn't seem to have the same abilities as the first one they had dealt with in the Xvart Village. That particular blue-furred gnoll attempted to stab forward again, but Harry rushed forward himself, pushing the enemy's halberd up and to the side, his sword stabbing forward. He caught the Flind in the chest, peeling off a large portion of its health, and then Khalid stabbed in from the side, ending its life.

But then, the Gnoll Chieftain was on them, pushing two of his Flinds to either side in order to smash Minsc to the side with a display of strength that made Harry gasp. He gasped again when the halberd flicked back to the other way, nearly decapitating him. A last instant duck saved Harry's life, but he was still smashed flat, his helmet crushed in the side and his head ringing. If not for the Barkskin spell on him, Harry knew that might have knocked him out entirely.

You have suffered a critical hit, minus 25 points to health.

You are not quite concussed, but your head is telling you that was a near run thing.

Total health: 75/120

The Gnoll Chieftain stood over him, and brought it is halberd down, but Harry rapidly interposed the tower shield, lunging up off of his feet as hard as he could, meeting the blow and pressing upwards. His sword flicked out underneath the Gnoll Chieftain's guard, stabbing twice, pairing off more health, and the Gnoll Chieftain backed away to bring its halberd into play again but Harry didn't relent, pressing forward hard.

As one of the timers he was keeping track of dinged down, Harry watched his opponent's legs, and when he saw them bunch in preparation for a jump, Harry jumped up off the ground too, an instant before the Gnoll Chieftain used stomp again. That caused some surprise in the Gnoll Chieftain's face, and Harry's sword point caught it on the side of its head, cutting across one of its eyes.

Critical hit, you have blinded the Gnoll Chieftain Nashaka on the right side of his face.

Having made his own save against the Stomp, Khalid tried to take advantage of this, but he was quickly engaged by a few Flinds, both of the wolves Jaheira had summoned recently dead by this point. Indeed, he nearly found himself in trouble, a halberd blow taking him in the thigh.

At the same time, Harry also tried to follow up only to take a hit from the side, as he landed, a light one, but it made him stumble on his landing. A second later Harry grunted, as the Gnoll Chieftain halberd shaft caught him in the chest hurling him backwards. His armor

dented but held, yet Harry found himself unable to breathe for a moment, forced entirely on the defensive.

You have cracked a rib, breathing will be more difficult, -15 to health, -5 to health every 2 minutes this wound goes untreated.

Behind Harry, Edwin was concentrating on backing up his ogre, and did not look to the side to notice his friends were in trouble. Indeed, it was debatable he would have at all since he had ignored Harry's orders to concentrate what damage dealing long range spells he had left on the Dungeon Boss.

Minsc on the other hand did notice and he instantly decided what he had to do. He switched out from his heavy Claymore again to the Chesley Crusher, before bellowing out his warcry as he once more called upon his berserk fury. "You will not stop me from rescuing fair Dynaheir when we are so close! GRAHAHAHAHAH!!!!"

The Flind that he had been fighting had stepped forward, grinning maliciously, and thrusting his halberd forward to take advantage of the time that Minsc had to take to switch weapons, but then found his weapon smashed to pieces by the heavier halberd. He wasn't surprised for long as Minsc snarled and cut him down with back swipe, before racing into the Flinds that were attacking Harry from the side.

Two of the three turned to engage him, and Harry thrust his sword up into the skull from under his jaw of the other one. Khalid and Jaheira instantly turned their attention to other things, as Harry shouted out "I need healing, then Jaheira, backup..."

Imoen appeared then, stabbing the Gnoll Chieftain in the back, or attempting to at least. But the Gnoll Chieftain had turned and took the blow in the side, before lashing out faster than Imoen could avoid, not with his halberd but with a kick. She was hurled through the air by the force of the kick, her small, spare frame unable to even try to hold up against that as another message appeared in Harry's view.

Imoen has taken a Critical Hit. -35 to health.

Again, it was only Jaheira's earlier application of the Barkskin spell that kept her from taking at least a crippling injury. As it was Imoen rolled with the blow, letting it carry her away from the rest of the battle where she could once more use her Hide in Shadows.

At the same time, once more the timer for the Dungeon Boss's automatic respawn ended, and five gnoll elites and another Flind appeared.

This action had pulled Harry and Minsc away from protecting Edwin where he was standing on the right side of their defensive position. While Minsc was hacking and destroying at the front of the battle and Harry using the moment to let Jaheira heal his rib, a few of these new enemies took what they saw as the easy option charging the man in red. A few were felled by his spells but then the others were within striking range.

Edwin protected himself ably from the halberd's of his foes for a few seconds thanks to a spell called Protection from Normal Weapons scintillating in the air around him, making him practically immune to nonmagically-enhanced weapons. But it could only absorb so much damage before it failed. It did so now, as the Gnoll Chieftain turned to dealing with Minsc, smashing the berserk Ranger aside.

This cleared the way for another two flinds to charge forward just as the spell around Edwin failed. Harry leaped forward, attempting to get in the creature's way, but he could only take one of the flinds out of the equation, hammering into his side and slowing him down, his sword stabbing. The metal of his sword broke, and Harry was flung aside for a second before he could rearm himself. The other Flind then stabbed forward, his halberd taking Edwin straight into the chest even as the man tried to intone another spell.

The Red Wizard stared down at the chunk of metal in his chest, and then gasping fell to his knees. "Curse you! I said, this wasn't...worth... dying for..."

He fell to the floor dead, but before the Flind attacking him could slice his head off, Harry leaped around the one fighting him, pulling his hammer from his weapons space and smashing the Flind's head in from the side, the force of the blow sending the body staggering even as it also crushed its skull.

He looked down at Edwin's body, seeing the notification that the man had died as it flashed up into his line of vision, before turning away and shouting out "Imoen! Spells free, Stupefy!"

The dual Stupefy washed over the entire room, knocking the weaker gnolls unconscious into the floor. This left the remaining Flinds still on their feet, pressing in hard around Khalid and Jaheira, the area around Harry devoid of conscious enemies for a moment. Jaheira was bleeding from numerous cuts, her chain mail not up to stopping the halberd ends, while Khalid had flung aside the ruined remains of his shield, and was now using his sword with both hands, showing a skill and dexterity that bespoke of his true level rather than the extremely limited level that he had been reduced to.

Harry charged forward shouting out "Imoen, deal with those three!" as he raced forward, the Stupefy spells having cleared the way to the Chieftain as he backed away in order to use the technique Arcing Quake. The Chieftain turned, trying to keep Harry in sight, but Harry quickly shifted from his hammer to his throwing hammer, and hurled a second one at the Chieftain.

The monster smacked it aside with its halberd, but its attempt to use the dangerous ability was halted in place, and Harry thrust out a hand shouting "Incendio!" a tongue of flame flashed out, something like Agganazzar's Scorcher, only a bit more targeted and draining 15 points from Harry's health.

The Gnoll Chieftain screamed as he fell backwards, while behind him, Imoen had dropped her sword, and intoned “Lacero!” From one hand a whip appeared, and she raced forward now dancing between the Flinds, while Jaheira knelt next to her husband’s form, intoning her second to last healing spell.

Even as it’s fur caught fire still the Gnoll Chieftain didn’t go down, or rather it did, but only to roll and put out the fire in its fur. It then raised its halberd and was able to block Harry’s first blow, from the hammer. The two of them strained against one another, and Harry smirked suddenly, the tower shield in his other hand disappearing as he thrust out that hand, shouting out “Expeliarmus!”

The magical blast slammed into the Gnoll Chieftain, and the Gnoll Chieftain found itself flung backwards where it rolled. Ignoring the fact that spell had put his health in the red Harry charged forward and his hammer came down on its head, once, twice.

It thrust up desperately with its halberd in just one hand, a short stabbing blow that took Harry in the chest, lifting him off the floor, penetrating his chest plate slightly and making Harry very grateful that he hadn’t tried to us a bombarding spell. If he had, that blow would’ve been enough to kill him, so low was his health.

But then he was hit by the last healing spell from Jaheira, and before the chieftain could pull back to strike again Harry brought his hammer down a third time. Finally the health bar above the Dungeon Boss disappeared, as did his brain and skull under the blow from a hammer.

Harry fell to his knees, as the Dungeon Boss’s body slowly started to glow with light as a new message appeared, its sides glinting gold as all important messages did.

You have slain the Dungeon Boss! You are one step closer to clearing the dungeon.

Remember, experience is cumulative, and you will only receive the experience for this deed when you clear the dungeon.

Hint: Remember to check his body for valuable loot. The nature of loot **does not** follow logic!

Dimly, Harry pulled out some more of the healing berries, looking over to where Minsc was raging and slashing at many of the downed gnolls all around him. The three Flinds had been practically flayed by Imoen, and now Khalid was back on his feet, looking groggy, but still in one piece. He too was eating his last handful of the healing berries, chomping into them as fast as possible while Jaheira did the same with the few that she had been given.

“Khalid, Jaheira. You two have better hearing than we do, can you hear anything out past that door?” Harry asked, his voice sounding slurred to his own ears. Like the cavern entrances, doorways like that and the town for, doorways block Harry’s map.

When his health ticked up into the yellow, Harry stopped eating the berries, leaving him with six of them left, and he quickly looked at his friends and allies one after another. At the

same time, Imoen used the calming charm and cheering charm on Minsc, as Harry had earlier to knock him out of his Berserk state.

Minsc was once more in a bad way, but Harry knew he had at least a few more health berries on him, so perhaps with Harry's own mixed in, he'd be back into fighting trim, if not well off. *At this point I doubt that's a possibility for any of us.* While Minsc was the worst off now, the others had all taken heavy hits, and none of them had the health points Harry and Minsc had.

Jaheira moved forward, and Harry looked at a few of the messages blinking in the corner of his line of sight. It looked as if they still had two hours before the next respawn time, but that the patrol time had come and gone at least once, maybe twice since the battle began. *Still, I can't hear any hue and cry, so maybe...*

The half-elf Druid set herself against the doorframe, listening intently, then shook her head. "Nothing. I don't detect anything out there."

"In your opinion, will the rest of these gnolls know we've killed their chieftain?"

"No. If one of the heart stones had been here, then yes, they would have known. As it is, they will have no idea that he has fallen, unless there is some kind of set schedule wherein some stop by here in his private area. This hall is obviously for his use and those of his elite, so I think we're safe enough," Jaheira stated.

Khalid nodded in agreement with his wife, still looking a little under the weather. Like the rest, his health status was deep in the yellow, but unlike Harry, who had broken three new ribs in the chieftan's last attack. "I b, b, believe, that the Chieftain would w, w, want to the area to be separated f, f, from the rest of his tribe, all the better to l, l, lord it over them."

"I suppose that makes sense." On heavy feet Harry moved over to Edwin, nodding to Minsc who Imoen had put through the same treatment Harry had earlier to break him out of his berserk state. "How many more spells do you have?" Harry asked looking over at Jaheira.

"Only the one tangling vine I'm afraid," she said slowly, gesturing to her staff which she had lifted from the floor from where she dropped it earlier in favor of her club before rushing over to the door. "I still have one Nature's Wrath, one Buzzing Flies spell and one healing spell one here. We've gone through all the rest. I do hope that the mother dryad will be willing to recharge it for me once more.

So saying she strode over to Harry, laying the end of her staff on his shoulder very lightly as she intoned the spell, closing her eyes and concentrating on her connection to her staff, the better to control the flow of the healing magic. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he felt his body becoming less heavy, his broken ribs healing themselves under her direction. "Thank you," he murmured.

She smiled at him, and Harry was struck not for the first time at how smiling like that transformed her normally severe expression. "You are welcome Harry."

"Even if I nearly got you, your husband and all of us killed?" he asked quietly.

"Harry you lead us into a trap it is true, but it is a trap that would have captured any adventurer, save perhaps the most high level bands," she replied softly, shaking her head. "True, if my husband and I could fight at our true levels, we would've been able to fight our way out, but as it is we did as well as could be expected. Only Edwin died, and he did not die forever either. Do not beat yourself up over this. Believing that they are at fault for everything that occurs around them is something only the young are so foolish as to do, and I do not want to go back to calling you young one or child."

"I don't want that either," Harry said with a laugh, but also throwing off his momentary guilt about what had occurred like an ill-fitting cloak. It was true after all. No one could have known that they would be thrust forward and locked into the room the instant they were in the presence of the Dungeon Boss, and they hadn't been able to tell they were all in the presence of a Dungeon Boss before the door had opened. Harry still thought they could have done better, but he wasn't going to wallow in guilt at how it turned out.

With a sigh, Harry moved over to Edwin, reaching down and closing his eyes, before placing his hand on the mage's chest, seeing the same message he'd seen when Garrick died. A second later, the mage disappeared into his item box. Then Harry leaned back, sighing, closing his eyes and just resting for a brief moment, before pushing himself to his feet determinedly, looking over at the corpse of the chieftain. "Minsc, come here for a second."

With two dead bodies in his item box, Harry had barely a pound left before he would start to feel it, which meant anything on the gnoll chieftain would have to be carried by someone else. Harry walked Minsc through the easy way to strip the Chieftain, causing Minsc to chuckle in delight, shaking his head. "Your Advanced Adventurer System is most amusing and helpful! I look forward to seeing what happens when we clear this dungeon!"

"At this point, I want a vote people," Harry said shaking his head. "I know I'm not as experienced as a few of you, and this is a big decision. Do any of you think we should rest here before searching the rest of the keep? We could rest, let Jaheira use her spells on us before moving on, and we've got enough junk around to barricade the two entrances easily."

"No!" Minsc shouted, his good humor fading instantly, now looking almost angry enough to accidentally enter his berserk mode. "My Witch is still out there somewhere, I will not rest when she is so close when so many of the obstacles between us have been cast down by the might boots of righteousness! Right Boo!?"

"I vote we rest," Jaheira said with a sigh of weariness. "But I am uncertain that even in this area we would be able to do so. Like my husband, I have been on dungeon dives before. And resting even in closed rooms is asking to be attacked in the night."

“Ja, J, Jaheira is right,” Khalid said with a nod. “Enemies can literally s, s, spawn right on top of you if y, y, your luck is bad enough.”

“All right,” Harry said rubbing at his face wearily. “But, Minsc, Khalid, both of you switch to bow and arrows. I’ll hold the front line. Harry gestured to his tower shield, patting it happily as he intoned, “Repairo!”

The tower shield’s durability was re-enhanced to one hundred and Harry cheerfully chomped down on the last of his healing berries, the spell having knocked him into the red once more. Being in the red in health was not fun and brought with it a headache, along with something Harry would call a bone ache which was debilitating in the extreme. Wordlessly Jaheira also handed over some of her berries to the others, leaving all of them in the yellow. They were not exactly capable of a full fight, but at least healthy enough to engage the enemy.

With Harry in the lead, and without even looking at the items from the Chieftain yet – none of them were weapons, and the plate armor was in horrible repair - they moved over to the door and flung it open, with Harry hopping out quickly looking to either direction. No one was around, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Imoen past him, not needing orders to understand what her role was once more.

Harry watched as she updated the map, whispering to the others, all of whom knew about his map ability. “All right, one way is a dead-end, a few rooms, all empty from what Imoen’s seeing. I’d assume they’re full of junk or something. The other way...”

He smiled wearily as Imoen past her them, heading in the other direction and waited while she did so, chuckling as she slapped Khalid on the rear as she went. “The other way... shit. She’s found about 30 warriors in a long hall, tough to make out individual dots in that horde. But they’re down on the first floor, were on the second floor here. Imoen exited out onto a, what do you call that thing, like a balcony except it goes all around? Is there a special word for that?”

“I think you are getting rather too tired whatever your Constitution,” Jaheira said frowning thoughtfully as Harry. “There doesn’t need to be a special word for that, but I think you and Imoen might wish to look into the mental effects of too many blood magic spells in quick succession even if you are healing yourself from the health points that they take.”

“Yo, you seemed somewhat p, p, punch drunk after the l, last time you had to use multiple s, s, spells in a row,” Khalid observed, clapping the younger man on the shoulder.

“Later,” Harry waved off their worries. After this fight I’ll cheerfully look into that while we’re recovering.” Harry thought about it for a moment, then looked down at his suddenly full hand, which was holding a Potion of Invisibility. “Do you know how long it takes someone to notice you once you come out from under a Potion of Invisibility if you’re casting a spell?”

“The instant the spell hits the potion fades,” Jaheira replied promptly.

“Good.” With that Harry thrust the potion out to her. “In that case, I think I’ve got a plan. It’s not pretty, but who cares?”

The plan was ridiculously simple really. Jaheira imbibed in the potion downing the entire bottle. Much like medicine, potions like that had to be taken all at once to have the intended effect. Then she moved down the corridor, joining Imoen and whispering instructions to her as the other girl had been coming back, having gone all around the balcony.

From where they had entered the balcony moved in two directions, around the main hall below, one side ending quickly against the wall while the other direction led to the stairs leading down and around the other side of the rectangular hall. There were no enemies on this level any longer, the other doorways being blocked off by fallen rocks.

The others waited down the corridor from the enemy until Harry said “Okay, judging by the movement of the enemy Jaheira’s just intoned the spell. Let’s move!”

With that, they all raced downwards, as Imoen flung a bottle of the grog they’d taken from the gnolls they’d fought when they met Minsc down onto the massive group of gnolls below. Harry tossed his own bottle, followed in rapid succession by two more bottles from Khalid and Minsc. A third bottle flew from Jaheira before she switched to her sling.

With her spell being able to cover the entire room, many of the gnoll had been caught in the tangling vines. Those that weren’t turned, trying to race up the staircase but Harry was already there, and he shouted out, “Now!”

At that cry Imoen came out of her Hide in Shadows next to Jaheira thrusting both hands down towards the group, shouting, “Incendio!” The spells caught, and spread among the trapped gnolls via of the tangling vines, and the cooking oil, spreading the fire all around the room quickly.

Then Minsc and Khalid began to fire into the mass from one side, while Imoen and Jaheira took the other. Harry protected the one stairwell up, slamming his tower shield into the ground, his hammer flicking out only occasionally as enemies came to him. At the same time, he smiled thinly as he saw the now-familiar message:

You have used the tactic: Killing Zone.

Like dogs and other wild animals, gnolls had a massive fear of fire. Harry had of course noticed this before, going so far back as the fight at the stream. He knew without a doubt that this tactic would work, and he was proven correct. The majority of the gnolls below broke, and with each one that panicked, the process became quicker. Even when the heart stone within the room began to spawn more creatures, they too were caught up in the fear, and the fires spreading among them.

It was still long going and the hanging tangling vines spell had long since faded, and Imoen nearly collapsed after having to redo the fire spell as the fires below started be put out

by the sheer mass of gnolls stamping and rolling around. But none of the gnolls got past Harry's tower shield, and the others killed and kept on killing, slings and arrows winnowing the horde below until the last fell.

By that point all of them were exhausted, and they watched with almost dead eyes as the heart stone slowly rose up out of the center of the hall. "I don't have enough health to want to use a spell to shatter it," Harry said slowly, pulling out his throwing hammers. "These will have to do."

It took all three throwing hammers Harry had left, the magical weapons disappearing after they were used unfortunately, before the heart stone shattered.

You have destroyed the last heart stone! Due to this being the last heart stone, no further enemies will respawn in the dungeon during your time within.

Any enemies already spawned will remain in their positions, filled with a sense of unease and unwilling to leave their current positions. You are one step closer to clearing the dungeon.

Harry sighed, then looked over to Imoen and Minsc. "You two, I trust that you both can search the rest of this place?"

That search actually didn't take all that long. Only one area of the keep beyond what they'd already seen had to be explored. There, a single room which looked like a servants quarters had been set up as a jail. Within Dynaheir lay against the wall, her hands bound above her head, a hood over her face.

Minsc smashed the iron bars down with a single blow from his halberd, not having switched back to his claymore, and strode forward, pulling off the woman's hood. He then lifted the woman up, looking over at the others. "This is my with Dynaheir, I cannot thank you enough, you truly have been warriors of goodness and the lights today! Your deeds will be sung in the holes of my homeland forever!"

This close, even in the light of the torches Harry could tell the woman in Minsc's arms was a beauty. She had a lush figure, with curves well beyond that of Jaheira let alone Imoen in terms of her hips and bust. The color of her skin was a rich mahogany, odd when Harry considered where Rasheman was supposed to be. She had black hair, currently matted and dirty plastered against her head and neck, full, if bleeding lips, and high, curved cheekbones.

She also had several debilitating Statuses on her. Concussed, unconscious, malnourished, hungry (Harry thought that one rather redundant) and hobbled, which probably had something to do with how swollen her ankles looked in the light of the torch. It was clear the woman would need a lot of care and time to get back on her feet.

Nonetheless Harry smiled faintly at Minsc's praise and enthusiasm. His smile widened noticeably though as he read the message that had just appeared in front of his and his party member's eyes. One of many, it and several which followed were surrounded by gold outlines.

You have cleared the Dungeon, Gnoll Fortress! Congratulations!

This dungeon is cleared. No new monsters will spawn here for at least four and a half years.

Laughing, Harry pushed them all to the side with an eye movement, then looked back at Minsc. "Come on, let's head up to the Dungeon Boss's room. We'll fort up there for the rest of the day. I don't know about you, but I think we've all earned some rest."

Even Jaheira could not stop herself from joining the cheer this statement evoked.

End Chapter