

The kobolds charged at us, fearlessly attacking us despite our significantly larger size and favorable numbers. Their growling turned to snapping as they jabbed at Barry, whom they reached first, their sharp, dangerous-looking teeth lashing out at him even as they tried to stab him with their spears. Rather than try and fight them both at once, Barry wisely dashed backward, letting both Jessica and Kate attack as he moved between them. The kobolds, caught off guard by the sudden retreat, were just off-kilter enough for Kate to slam her newly crafted spiked axe into one of them, nearly crumpling it to the floor.

Meanwhile, Jessica slammed her machete into her target's shoulder, sinking the blade an inch into the small, humanoid lizard's flesh. Surprisingly, the lizard seemed unphased and lashed out in response, slashing at Jessica's leg. The stone spear cut into her pants, leaving a slice along her leg, before she was able to yank her machete free. Without hesitation, she slammed her weapon down again, this time on its head, the sound of a cracking skull echoing through the small cave.

As the second kobold collapsed, Barry immediately stepped forward to double-tap the small creature with a jab of his spear. The cave went silent save for our breathing and the subtle sound of flowing water as we all anxiously waited for more of the small creatures to arrive. Nothing appeared after nearly a minute, despite the sounds of chitting, yapping, and hissing coming from deeper down into the cave.

"You alright, Jessica?" I asked, keeping an eye on the far cave as Barry helped her.

"Yeah, just a light slice," She said, sounding more annoyed than hurt. "That didn't make any sense, though. That hit should have at least just off his arm and cut much deeper..."

"They aren't the first supernaturally sturdy thing we have fought," I pointed out as Barry wrapped her leg up as best he could.

"Could have something to do with the weapon," Kate suggested as Barry helped Jessica back up to her feet. "Barry and I have weapons that Roger made, and we cut through pretty well..."

"Yeah, but the question is if that's because those weapons are superior or if something of the system is leaking through here..." I said, looking around, poking at the dead kobolds. "That's a common trope for system apocalypses... right, Barry?"

"From the ones I've read, yeah, normal guns and weapons tend not to work as well," Barry responded. "But I'm not sure that's what's happening here. I just think these are tough little fuckers, and normal weapons aren't enough."

"Yeah... I think you are right... Either way, Roger's job just got even more important."

With our first round of fighting won, we made our way to the gap in the stone, where the kobolds had just come from. We peeked down the hole, our flashlights lighting it up for three or four meters. Small amounts of the same glowing mushroom ran along the ceiling, providing the bare minimum amount of light to navigate the dark, damn cave corridor. It was so dark, in fact, that even with our flashlights, we almost missed an offshoot into a side cave, only seeing it when a trio of kobolds leaped from the darkness and ambushed us.

"Look out!" Jessica shouted, having been walking behind Kate and Barry, with me standing behind her, watching our backs.

Barry reacted beautifully, holding up his own spear, his group far back on the shaft of his weapon, instinctively using it to hold off the small creatures long enough for the rest of us to react. Kate slammed her spiked axe down again, this time lopping off her target's arm, the small monster screeching and yelping, holding its spear in one hand as its arm oozed purple blood. Meanwhile, I stabbed over Barry's shoulder, punching through one another kobold's chests, and their corpse fell to the ground. Jessica handled the last one by swinging her shotgun around and taking aim.

"Hold on, wait-" I started to shout, reaching out with one hand, trying to motion to her to hold her fire.

My words were too late, and she pulled the trigger, a single slug punching through the last kobold's neck, almost completely decapitating the small creature. Clearly, the bullet overcame whatever supernatural toughness the diminutive creature had, devastating it instantly. Unfortunately, the gunshot also devastated our ears, the cave reverberating with the gunshot, the sound slamming into my head, my ears audibly ringing.

All of us clutched at our heads, stunned by the gunshot. I was just barely able to pull out of it to focus around us, wincing and blinking through the pain, making sure we didn't get ambushed again. When we finally started to recover, Kate looked over at Jessica harshly.

"Really? Didn't think that firing a gun down here would be a bad idea?" She asked, rubbing her left ear with a finger. "Dammit, my hearing is already bad enough..."

"I... no, sorry," Jessica admitted. "I just knew my machete wouldn't work, so I switched to my shotgun..."

"It's fine, Jessica, I didn't think of it either. Lesson learned, right?" I said, and she nodded, already switching back to her machete.

"If you knew about it, why didn't you warn us?" Barry asked, frowning at Kate as he felt the grip of his pistol. "You-"

"Woah, take it easy, Barry, it hurt like a bitch. She has every right to respond negatively," I said, holding up my hands. "I'm sure it was nothing personal..."

"No, was just annoyed," Kate responded after I gave her a pointed look, giving her own vaguely apologetic look to Jessica. "Sorry."

Barry seemed to calm down, his need to defend Jessica apparently sated for now. I could see Jessica rolling her eyes behind him, but she couldn't hide the small, happy smile it gave her either.

"Let's just all agree not to use the weapons unless it's an emergency," I added, stepping into the side cave for a moment to double-check there weren't more Kobolds or another path. All I could see was another room with hanging fruits and glowing mushrooms. "The bastion will fix any damage we do to our hearing if we have to use them, so if it comes down to it..."

"Grin and bear it, right," Barry said with a wince.

"Right. Okay, guys, let's push deeper. Eyes peeled for ambushes," I said, taking the lead this time, letting Barry back us up from the back.

We continued deeper and deeper into the cave, finally stepping into another open chamber. This one was at least twice the size of the original, and while there were still hundreds of hanging vines, most of them were pushed off to the side. In the center was a pool of water, filled from a stream that entered through the wall of the cave and flowed to the center.

Unfortunately, we didn't have any time to appreciate that because we were almost immediately charged by even more kobolds. Six of them this time, with three more hanging back. This time, they weren't just armed with spears but large stone clubs and crude axes as well.

Fearing that we would be overwhelmed by numbers alone, I ordered everyone back. Together, we retreated backward as Kate and I held them off, widely swinging my spear to keep them from flanking us. When we stepped back into the connecting corridor, we stopped, using the superior positioning to whittle the oncoming system spawn down. The first to break was the charging six, who were forced to split into two waves of three. They pushed and shoved each other to get to us, and their conflict meant we had plenty of opportunities to take them out.

Just as we took down the last of the first wave, the second wave crashed into us. We have moved forward slightly as we fought, naturally taking steps to hit harder. They must have seen an opportunity because three hanging back pounced on us, trying to break us down. This time, it was Barry who came to the rescue as Kate and I struggled to hold them off, having lost some of our advantage. He lashed out with his spear, catching one of the kobolds in the chest as it tried to take advantage of me flinching from another attack. In a second, he shifted, switching to stop a blow from hitting Kate as well.

The fight was far from easy, even with Barry's help. Both Kate and I took a few hits, with her hand getting smashed and me getting stuck in the arm with a spear. When we finally dispatched the last lizard-like humanoid, we stopped to tend to our wounds. Kate's hand was bruised and bloodied, but thankfully not broken, while the stab wound in my arm wasn't severe enough to disable me. While Jessica wrapped my arm in a bandage, Barry poked at the kobolds.

"Huh... I think they are getting bigger," He commented, using the but of his spear to flip one over onto its back. "The last three to charge us, they are a good head taller than the rest."

I looked over with a frown, waiting for Jessica to finish before joining the younger man. I first examined the one he was poking at, switching back to the first wave, nodding in agreement.

"You're right. They are more muscular, too... Even their teeth look a bit bigger," I pointed out. "That's not good. Depending on how deep we have to go, this could get a lot less manageable."

"When do we cut out losses and return to the surface?" Jessica asked. "We won't be able to outrun them if they overwhelm us. They are too fast."

"When we start feeling like we can't keep up," I explained, shaking my head. "If we can't handle a wave, we will use our guns. It won't be fun, but it's better than dying."

With our wounds tended to and our stamina returned, we walked around the cavern for a minute before finally finding the next corridor. We stepped in and began walking down, slowly going deeper and deeper into the ground. The darkness started to feel oppressive, heavy against our shoulders the deeper we went. Even with our flashlights and the glowing mushrooms, it felt like we were going blind. Twice, I could have sworn our flashlights were slowly dimming, only for the illusion to fade as I jerked around to find out what was happening.

We encountered two more patrols of kobolds, a group of four and a group of five, both of them bigger than the last. Each group ambushed us from smaller side rooms. Or rather, they tried to ambush us, as we had wisened up since the first time and were keeping a much closer lookout.

Each group was slightly larger and stronger than the last, enough so that it was noticeably harder to fight them. I was beginning to worry that they would soon be too strong for us to handle. So far, we had countered their number advantage due to better weapons, superior strength and strategy, but that could only go so far if they kept getting stronger.

Finally, after killing another group of three, we stumbled into the most extensive cave yet. It was massive, easily double the last one, stretched out into an enormous oval. Vines and mushrooms hung down by the cave walls., casting shadows around us.

Surprisingly, both our flashlights and the yellow mushrooms along the walls seemed dim compared to the blue glow coming from the far end of the cave. There, sitting on a pedestal that seemed molded out of the cave wall, was a blue, glowing crystal, maybe one and a half times the size of my head.

The pedestal was on a raised portion of the cave, with a series of stepping platforms leading upward to it. The stone platforms looked natural, even with the unnatural precision in which they had been shaped.

A shadow was cast along the entire cave as a kobold stepped in front of the crystal. He was holding a spear, one that looked like it was actually crafted rather than just smashed together until it stuck. Around him were two kobolds of equal size, and all three of them were staring at us, lips raised in an angry scowl. Ten more kobolds stood around the platforms, looking up at them.

The largest kobold pointed at us and screeched, and all ten of the kobolds on the lower platforms turned and screeched at us, charging at us without hesitation.

"Spells!" I shouted, raising my spear and using it to aim a bramble spell.

Casting it like that didn't change its form in the slightest, but it did make aiming it a bit easier. The spell grew from the ground just in front of the charging kobolds. Thorny vines grow and tangle the first line's feet, causing them to stumble and flail, getting even more tangled in the dangerous thorns. Before anybody could capitalize on my spell, however, the kobolds charging *behind* the ones now flailing in the bramble jumped up, landed on their comrades, and used them as stepping stones to clear the trap. I raised my hand to cast it again, only to have to roll back as a spear whistles just past my head, thrown by the final three kobolds.

I cursed, and together, all four of us braced as the kobolds crashed into us. We punished them for mindlessly charging, but unfortunately, even as we killed three of them, four more took their place. Kate was forced to cast her spark, using the spell through her axe. She swung, and a blade of crackling lightning emerged from her swing, rushing forward and splashing into the incoming wave. Most of them stumbled, the electricity causing their bodies to spasm and stumble.

"Again, Kate!" I shouted out.

She nodded and swung again, another curved wave of charged energy splashing over the kobolds. This time, it was much closer, and I could feel my hair stand up on end as it washed over the kobolds again. Immediately, I pressed the advantage, lashing out at the stunned kobolds, managing to kill the one that had been coming for me, as well as a spare. Both Barry and Jessica managed to do the same before Kate finished hers off with a brutal chop of her Dino-Dog axe.

We quickly finished off the first two kobolds, still stuck in my bramble trap, before finally approaching the last three kobolds. I could see them grip their weapons tightly as we got closer, clearly waiting, ready to explode.

Some sort of hidden trigger finally set them off when we were ten feet away from the pedestal, and all three kobolds charged simultaneously. The one who had hurled a spear at me had already gotten another, wielding it as they made a beeline for me, probably not happy that its attack hadn't worked as it had hoped.

For a full minute, we traded blows, my team working just as hard to take down the other monsters while I barely kept up with the small little bastard. Over and over, he would jump in, try and attack me before dashing back out of my range. He was fast, too fast, even with my enhancements, I could barely keep up. Still, barely was good enough, especially when I was more than willing to play dirty. As it jumped forward at me, expecting to be able to weave between my attacks, I once again cast bramble, this time around my own feet. It would mean that I wouldn't be able to move, but it also meant my enemy couldn't either, and only one of us was relying on speed to stay alive.

He landed in front of me, immediately stumbling as his feet got tangled in the bramble. He recovered, but not before I brought my spear down on his back, slicing into him. He still tried to attack me, but his off-angle in the bramble meant I could just lean back to avoid it. With one final shout, I drove my spear into his chest, the tip coming out the other side.

When my target collapsed, I immediately looked around, only to find that my party members had already handled their targets. Kate was a bit beat up, with a bloody nose and a busted lip, but all three of them were standing.

"Everyone good?" I asked, letting out a sigh of relief when they all nodded. "Good, great... now, let's go see about getting that crystal. The sooner we get out of here, the better.