

I am also trying something new here with Khalid after several reviews over on fanfic spoke about it in a negative light: merely mentioning his stutter whenever he talks instead of putting the stutter in. Tell me what you think. Personally, I think it doesn't convey the same level of verbal problems he has getting his words across, but I would be interested in your opinions. This is an experiment and may not be repeated. I know it makes reading easier, but even after editing the chapter I just don't think that it really shows Khalid's character as well. So unless people reaaaaally like it better this way, I am going to go back to putting in the stutter myself.

This has been edited by Justlovereadin'. He did it in about 24 hours folks, the lateness of the chapter is on me and my lack of spare time today. Despite that, I hope you enjoy it.

A Warning: big combat chapter.

Chapter 9: Kobold Capers

As they entered what the foursome that composed Harry's 'party' knew was a dungeon, Harry began to issue orders. "Imoen, Minsc, can you both use hide in shadows in here?" The question was mostly for Minsc's sake, rather than Imoen. His ability to use the skill came from his Ranger status after all, and Harry wasn't certain if it was as limiting as the one Jaheira could use, Forest Melding, which he knew she could not use outside forests. She had also said at one point it wasn't as good against actual enemies either.

Thankfully Minsc simply nodded, and Harry went on, his eyes flicking around the area. It was a large circular cavern where numerous mine rails connected together before heading outside. There were two miners and seven slaves scattered around the area, working at the walls of the mine in a desultory fashion. The hardship of the mine, or perhaps the oppressive atmosphere, and was such that only their clothing made Harry able to tell one group from another.

In the center of the room standing by several carts and piles of equipment were four guards. The carts around them looked almost like barricades, and the guards were nervously fingering their crossbows as they stared at the tunnels leading off the cavern. Harry didn't even glance at the Observation information, knowing what it would tell him: these men were close to panicking.

Ahead of where they entered, two tunnels were set very near to one another, the mine rails of one leading into the other before connecting to what Harry thought of as the main rail line, which swept from east to west. Harry thought of it in those terms because a small compass was part of the map his Map ability was building as he and the others walked forward towards the center of the room. Both ends of the main rail line curved around the edge of a

tunnel, although the tunnel itself did not follow them exactly, making it clear to Harry that the tunnels might break apart just out of sight into multiple passageways.

“Good. In that case when we start moving I’ll want you two to scout ahead of us. The rest of us will move forward in formation, once we sweep this room and what I think is a very short tunnel right in front of us.” So saying, Harry debated asking the miners and guards some questions, but decided to wait a moment, instead looking over at Khalid and Jaheira. “You two are the only ones who have any experience in tunnel fighting. Do you have anything else you want to add now that we’re in here?”

Jaheira nodded, looking towards Harry with some concern as Khalid had just finished telling her about the dungeon status of the mines. “I will say child, that was a good thing you were able to discover or take so many items which can give one infrared vision. In battle it is always what you cannot see that can kill you, and in the darkness, the number of such things multiplies. Here on the first floor it might not matter, but deeper in, it certainly will.”

“Any use of light will also tell our enemies where we are,” Khalid said in his usual stuttering manner, frowning as he too glanced around. He moved to one side, leaning over one of the mine carts. He picked up some of the ore within, hefting it in one hand before shrugging his shoulders, speaking slowly so that his stutter barely impeded his ability to get his words across. “If there is something wrong with this, I cannot tell. It certainly feels like iron should and is heavy enough.”

Shaking her head, at her husband’s comment, Jaheira continued to address Harry’s question. “I am not certain of the science behind it, but in the deep places of the earth there are sometimes hidden pockets of of volatile gases. While we mentioned how they often react to an open flame, at times they can also kill you via suffocation. Air may be an issue here when we go beyond the first floor. Don’t be afraid to retreat.”

She looked over at her husband, a grimace on her lips. “Some monsters can also burrow through the ground. Given the fact that no evidence of whoever is behind this mine’s travails has surfaced before now, it is clear they are covering their trails somehow. So we must be aware of that as well. Khalid and I might be able to hear them, but then again, we might not.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully at that, scratching at his lightning bolt scar thoughtfully while to one side, the two mages were silent for now, though for once their thoughts were entirely in line with one another: annoyance. They had known coming in that fire-based spells were not advisable here, but that depleted their combat ability more than either liked, and both had still memorized several fire spells just in case.

With that, he moved over to Imoen, gesturing her to join him as they moved to talk to the guards. “You know that the whole no fire thing goes for you too when you’re out on your own, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. No fire, no lightning either. Darn it,” Imoen grumbled, having hoped to make use of Lacero in case of ambush. Her ability to use that spell so well could be a lifesaver in a close-in fight like they would run into down here.

Having spotted the Adventurers, the guards looked a little more relaxed, and relieved too. The first words one of them said confirmed this. “Thank the gods, another band of Adventurers. I hope you all have better luck than that other group.”

“I prefer to not rely on luck, actually,” Harry answered with a snort. “But for that I need information. What can you tell us?”

“Erm, about what?” another guard asked. “If’n yer asking about what’s happening, we don’t know nothing. None of us’ve even seen what’s taken our friends, the miners or the slaves.”

“You’ve lost people too?” Imoen asked.

“Yeah, more’n a few. We, we don’t patrol past the second floor no more and even then only in teams of four. Before today, that number would have been enough, but, well, a, a patrol went out hours ago. They should’ve come back by now...” a third guard dithered.

“Calm down, please. Do you know their route? Were they going to a specific location? Are there specific locations we should be aware of?” Harry questioned, keeping his voice soothing, hoping that would keep the guards calm enough to give them some information.

This didn’t work as well as he could have wished, and the two of them barely got anymore information from the guards than they already had. Even worse, the guards didn’t seem to have made a study of the mine. There was no prepared map the party could use as a reference, and the four of them didn’t know anything about anything beyond the first floor. Although they did at least tell Harry the number of slaves and miners in the mines at present: forty and sixteen.

This prompted the Advanced Adventurer System to pop up a new message:

Nashkel Mines Dungeon Clearing Tasks has been updated:

You have been told that there are 40 slaves, 16 miners, and 8 guards within the dungeon at the time you have entered the dungeon. Of these, 7 slaves, 2 miners and 4 guards are by the entranceway. They are thus safe. The others are not, and finding them, or what happened to them, is part of your task in defeating this dungeon.

Slaves: 7/40

Miners: 2/16

Guards: 4/8

For every miner, guard and slave alive once the dungeon is cleared and the mines revert to being mines rather than a dungeon, your party members will receive + 80 experience.

For every miner's death which occurred after you entered the dungeon that you can confirm by bringing something back, you will receive + 20 experience.

For every miner whose death after you entered the dungeon you cannot confirm or whose identity you cannot discern, you will lose experience – 40.

Dead slaves lose you no experience. Finding slaves or miners slain before you entered the dungeon does not give you experience.

Your Travel Companions are not eligible for any of these bonuses or negatives.

While Harry and Imoen had been talking to the guards, Dynaheir and Branwen had been talking to the miners, while Jaheira and Khalid moved around the area, examining samples taken from the various carts. Most only had a few bits of ore, nowhere near as much as they could contain. Dynaheir and Branwen though, had something more important to report.

“One of the Miners, a man named Gord, told us there is a miner with four slaves working to the east of us. Beyond that, there are ten more miners at minimum on this level with more slaves working for them. He also said there might be two more miners, but he has no idea where ‘the young idjits’ are,” Branwen chuckled, before becoming serious, pointing to the eastern tunnel. “Regardless, I would ask that we stop to talk to each group and make certain they are all right.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. In fact, when we see them we’ll want to get them back here. I don’t want any of the miners or slaves under foot.” *Especially if this dungeon’s respawn point on this levels start respawning up here when we are on the second level. And getting them back to this cavern seems to be all we need to do to protect them.*

A final glance around his group told Harry that they were all ready, and he nodded, then asked them all to get into formation, three by three. He and Branwen took the lead, with the two magic users, extremely reluctantly, taking the next row, while Khalid and Jaheira took the back row.

Your party and it’s Traveling Companions have form a Formation: **The Line** (small scale, incomplete).

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

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

Note: due to the low level of this dungeon, Formations will lose their potency far more slowly than in higher-level dungeons. Just remember that Formations are tools, and like all tools they are not applicable in all battles.

Seeing that, Harry smiled faintly, but Edwin did not let his good humor last for long. “Why are you having me stand beside this, this self-righteous, sanctimonious weakling of a witch!?” Edwin scoffed.

“I agree! Putting this one beside me is just asking for trouble. It is not beyond the bounds of a red Wizard to stab an ally in the back, let alone someone like myself, who they have fundamental differences with. Trusting the Red Wizard to act in a manner befitting the party is one thing, to forget he is a Thayan is quite another.”

“Ah, at least you acknowledge Thayan superiority, woman. You get that right at least.”

“Superiority? Arrogance does not automatically make you superior, especially when one has so little as you to be arrogant about, you...”

“Wow, they seriously are either going to kill one another or fuck the hate out at some point,” Imoen whispered to herself, forgetting that Khalid and Jaheira had half-elven hearing.

In an instant Jaheira’s finger flicked the thief’s ear, while her husband broke out into a fit of coughs to cover his chuckles. “Child, I did not need that image in my mind!” The twitching of her lips though gave that the lie, and Imoen grinned at the older woman undependably.

Unaware of this byplay, Harry held up a hand to interrupt Dynaheir as behind her, Minsc began to breathe in deeply, a sure sign he was about to let fly with one of his bombastic statements. “It makes more sense from a tactical perspective. I realize that you two don’t get along, but neither of you are front line combatants. And Jaheira reminded us moments ago that we might be facing an enemy who can burrow through the ground to get behind us. Putting you both in the middle is the best option to prevent your deaths from an ambush and in a position to use your powers to best effect on both sides of the battlefield, thus turning the tide as I doubt the enemy will be able to match your magic.”

“While your attempt to use the Red Wizard’s ego against him is as admirable as it was obvious, that does not mean your point is without merit,” Dynaheir grumbled. “Still, do not expect us to do aught but work together to better the group. Anything more is impossible.”

“I am not asking for more,” Harry answered tartly. “I want us all to work together. Getting along is secondary to working towards a common goal.”

While Edwin snorted agreement at that, Dynaheir fell silent, watching Harry as he and Branwen, who patted him commiseratingly on the shoulder, took up position at the front of the group. *But what exactly are those goals in the long run, oh fulcrum?* Every time she interacted with Harry, she became more certain that he was the one she was here to aid, to guide to the proper path for the good of the world.

At Harry’s gesture, Minsc and Imoen left quickly, racing ahead of the others, activating their hide in shadows ability. While no longer visible to any of them, they still appeared on Harry’s map as green dots, which rapidly began to expand said map. Within minutes they had

concluded that yes, the tunnel did split into two passageways. One way was short, ending in a dead end with four slaves operating under a single miner. The other passageway shifted until it was pushing southward, and it was down this trail that Minsc and Imoen travelled quickly.

Even though he knew he shouldn't, Harry was concentrating most on that aspect, rather than the way ahead of him as he led the others in their wake. He did halt the party momentarily to talk to the miner overseeing the group of slaves, whose name was 'Miner Ruffie.'

A representative of the neutral class, Miner, Ruffie is extremely jittery, staring into every shadow as if waiting for it to come alive and eat him. Perhaps because he has seen something similar happen. You can tell he is determined to do his job, but equally ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble. He also seems rather callous in terms of the lives of his work team of slaves, as he is out here with three of them rather than another miner.

"We're adventurers who have been hired to try to clear out this mine of whatever is infesting it. Do you have anything you can tell us?"

All of the slaves shook their heads, not looking up from their work, their eyes dead and uncaring. But Ruffie repeated something Harry had heard earlier from Gord. "We, we're alright here, um, I'm near enough to run back to the entrance. Just er, well, I think there are a few more miners who haven't checked in in the past two hours. Beldin and Kylee." He paused, shivering. "The, they're young morons, don, don't know what they might be up to, but I wo, wouldn't er, that is, they might've braved the demons somewhere."

"Demons?" Edwin scoffed.

At that low question, Ruffie's body started to tremble, and he looked longingly over the adventurer's shoulder. "Th, the demons, the, they come from the dark, it' it's rising rising from the deeps. Th, they take us, have taken a lot of us. The mine, it, it's judging us for our sins!"

Shaking his head at how close the man seemed to be to having a breakdown, Harry spoke soothingly, raising a hand. "Okay, let's not talk about the demons. Is there anything else you can tell us?"

Shifting the talk away from the 'demons' seemed to help Ruffie calm down, and he slowly came back to himself. "Um, yes. Four guards were patrolling the area. They, they should be around here somewhere. U, Unless the demons got them!"

With a gesture, Harry sent his people into motion once more, with Branwen beside him murmuring, "Methinks that one's mind has been broken. Mind you, I cannot tell if that was easy or hard. Still, talk of demons is patently false. If even a single demon had been summoned, this whole mine would have been empty of people long since."

"True, he did speak of the demons in plural," Harry murmured.

As they moved down the southward tunnel, Harry once more became almost a zombie, concentrating most of his attention on the map, frowning. Ahead of them, there seemed to be a small room to one side, then the tunnel split again. *I am not liking all the splits, is that normal for a mine?*

Voicing this though, Khalid answered him, his normal stutter almost soothing after the near histrionic Ruffie. "It is. Miners after all have to follow the veins of whatever ore is in the area. You won't find many mines whose floor plan is actually organized as you might wish."

"Damn." Harry muttered.

As they went, the map began to propagate small, blue dots to signify single slaves chained to posts against the walls. Harry frowned as the number grew, noting how shocky and twitchy miners and slaves alike were.

Branwen however was not looking at the miners or even ahead of them down the passageway that Imoen and Minsc were scouting for them. Instead, she was looking at the walls. "I believe that Khalid's warnings about borrowers might be all too accurate."

She tapped it with her hammer then and Harry asked, "What are you doing?"

"My father worked at a mine for a time, part time."

"Part time?" Harry interrupted, one eyebrow rising quizzically. "How can someone be a parttime miner? Isn't it a fulltime job like everything else?"

Branwen laughed, shaking her head. "Mine, fish, you must do one or the other where I am from! Twas just my father's luck that his father's fishing ship survived, and he could take over fishing when he wanted to."

"So can you tell us anything?" Jaheira questioned, looking at the other woman appraisingly. For all her boisterous attitude and her profession as a priestess of Tempus, Branwen seemed to possess a lively sense of humor, and some common sense too, which made Jaheira approve of her on general principles.

"I never listened to stories about his days in the mines, I always wanted to hear more stories about combat and fighting, which I regret now. I can tell iron ore from steel but that is about it. And yet, I can tell you something else, something from my own observations. This area is an odd mix of stone and heavily packed earth, which adds weight to Jaheira's comment and further, something that is intelligent enough to cover his tracks."

There was a dinging sound, and a portion of Harry's line of sight was occlude by a message:

You have found a clue! Whoever is behind the disappearances of the miners and everything else going on in the mines of Nashkel also has to dig through the bones of the earth themselves, and if they have done it before, what is to stop them from doing it again?

Destroy or incapacitate any entrance to the mine bar the main one.

“For instance,” Branwen went on, raising her hammer and bringing it down against the wall. “I can tell that this portion here, is much weaker than one might suppose.” The hammer smacked into that area, and it collapsed, revealing a small, narrow passage.

When she did that, an entirely new segment of the mines opened up for them and on Harry’s map. Harry stared at it, then looked at how narrow it was. They would only be able to march one of rest, and even then, most of them would have to crouch down pretty badly, even Imoen.

Khalid and Jaheira stared at it, then shook their heads as one. “A blind,” they said, with only Khalid stuttering to show the difference between them.

“What’s a blind?” Harry asked, frowning, noting absently that the green of Minsc and Imoen had stopped among a cluster of blue dots right where the tunnel split again just out of sight of the rest of the party.

“An area created so that people could hide there, jump out, and retreat. They would not be stationed there overlong.” Jaheira looked at the others all around her. “We’re going to be very careful, this kind of technique could have been why none of the other adventurers who entered the mine ever returned.”

“They walk forward, they run into an enemy, and then from the sides of the tunnel come more enemies,” Harry thought aloud, rubbing at his scar grimly. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Soon enough they came to the same crossway that Imoen and Minsc had reached already. There, Imoen was doing her darndest to get a group of two miners and five slaves to talk to her, with far less results that she would normally get in such an endeavor thanks to her Flirty Little Lass ability.

Seeing even more slaves, Khalid and Jaheira grimaced as they had every time before. It seemed to pain them tremendously, although Harry noticed that both of the magic users, Branwen and Minsc all looked much more stoic about it, the Rashemani going so far as to ignore the slaves condition utterly.

“Is slavery that prevalent in the Sword Coast?” Harry whispered, not wanting to interrupt Imoen’s subtle questioning. He knew that she had way more people skills than him, not to mention the fact that she was a cute girl, and the people she was talking to were all men. Most of whom were slaves, who had undoubtedly been out here away from women for a long time.

“It is prevalent in many human nations but to an elf, being so confined... well, death would be preferable, frankly. To be locked away like that, I cannot think off the top of my head any crime that would cause an elf or half-elf to believe that would be an appropriate punishment. But you humans have your own way of dealing with things,” Jaheira replied.

It was interesting to hear Jaheira talk about races like that Harry reflected as he slowly nodded, looking over to Edwin and Dynaheir for an explanation. It was very clear despite being half-elf, as in her mother or father had been human, she was much more connected to her Elven heritage. Or perhaps, it is simply the fact there are so many half-elves, that they have created their own culture, and that it mirrors that of the elves to a certain degree.

He shook his head of such thoughts as he listened intently to the two mages, who told him that it was lawful to take those accused of crimes and enslave them until they worked off their debt to society. “Depending on the severity of the type of work that they are doing can vary wildly. For example someone sentenced to work in a mine like this might have killed, raped, been part of a band gang caught in the act, or, considering that this mine is run by Amn, offended someone among the high and wealthy there,” Dynaheir supplied, her tone becoming bitter on the last few words, causing grunts of agreement from the married couple.

“I don’t like that last,” Harry scowled.

“Yet it is true,” Edwin rejoined. “The strong will always make life difficult for those that annoy them. Else, what use is having power in the first place?”

“Still, that doesn’t mean we should have them underfoot,” Harry said, thinking about the new task he’d gotten after talking to the guards in the entrance-cavern. The half elves looked at him in confusion as to the others, but Harry simply shrugged, and moved over to the band of miners and slaves, gesturing Minsc to follow him. “Minsc, do you think you could cut through this iron?”

“With the Chesley Crusher I certainly could! Are we freeing these poor folk?” Minsc asked excitedly, Boo chittering from his shoulder before disappearing into his armor.

“As we don’t know their story, we’re not going to free them entirely. But I definitely don’t want them underfoot here in minds. Imoen, run back to the guards by the entrance. Tell them we’re going to be freeing and sending both the miners and slaves their way, we’ll move back the way we came and free the slaves we’ve already passed. Whatever else, we can’t protect them at the same time as we’re trying to discover what’s going on down here.” He then shrugged his shoulders winking at the big Ranger. “And if they are able to escape, more power to them.”

Each group of slaves was chained to one another and a post set against the walls of the mine. The Miners didn’t have the keys to these, which meant the guards had to come by and free them, while the miners could just walk back. Or, more importantly, flee. That disturbed

Harry immensely, reminding him too well of a joke Imoen had told him about running away from lions. You only had to be faster than someone else, not the lion itself.

“And if they were here to pay for grave crimes?” Dynaheir asked, not objecting, simply questioning.

“I was sent here because I was accused of stealing from my master,” Said one of them, staring at Harry with hope in his eyes. “Accused, mark you. I volunteered to swear that I didn’t do it in the temple of Helm himself, but I was simply sentenced and sent here to cover for the fact that the Master’s own daughter was doing the stealing, to pay for her drug use!”

Harry looked over at members of the team, and Khalid spoke up for them nodding his head firmly, his words coming through despite his stutter. “You cannot lie in a temple of Helm. If anyone tried, their hands would wither and fall off, as if they had been given some kind of wasting disease.”

“Bah!” Edwin spat. “Of course he would say such a thing. This is no temple of the prejudiced fist here, after all.”

“True, but there is a temple to Helm in Nashkel,” Dynaheir volunteered, more to annoy Edwin than anything else. She was more of a law-abiding sort, so simply freeing all these slaves was a bit beyond what she was comfortable with. “If the slaves are willing to confess to Helm there, then I would wager they have earned their freedom. What happens after that will be up to the locals. We will have done our part by clearing this mine of whatever force has poisoned it.”

Minsc swiftly went on releasing slaves with the miners swiftly moving to help. Harry sensed that this camaraderie was very strange, and that in normal times the real miners had as little to do with the slaves as they could get away with. But they were all terrified of being in the mine at all at this point, even here on the first floor, and being told to basically run off, was something they all could agree on.

Imoen returned at that point, slightly out of breath having run back the way they’d come and deactivating hide in shadows so abruptly that the miners and slaves all jumped in fright some of them even crying out in shock. Many of these men were strong, burly sorts, but whatever fighting spirit they might’ve had at one point, had clearly been drained out of them.

Putting that aside, Imoen reported, “The guards aren’t happy, but are willing to let the slaves and miners all stay in that main cavern for now. Beyond that, they won’t say, but since there were four of them, and we’ll be freeing lots of slaves...” she shrugged.

Harry moved without a word, gesturing the miners and slaves ahead of them. “Come on, we’ll guard your back until you’re back in sight of the entrance cavern and then return here to resume our patrol.”

“Bless you for this sir,” muttered one of the miners. “Don’t know why we keep on getting sent in here, old Emerson is getting desperate. Even here on the first level we’ve started to lose people these past few days.”

“We were told that outside, but we were also told that you had more guards. Where are they?”

“They lied,” miners said simply. “We’ve lost a lot of guards as well as miners, and most of them don’t come into the mines any further than the entrance. There’s a band of four around her somewhere, but where they are...” the man shrugged.

That made Harry angry, but he didn’t show it, simply nodding pleasantly to the man who had admitted this and gesturing him on to join his fellows. “In that case, it is doubly important that we get you and your fellows out of here.”

Although, he thought, we have covered what, a third of this floor, and still haven’t seen this guard patrol? Not good.

Returning the miners and slaves to the entrance cavern went without a hitch, though the glares the guards sent their way showed that Imoen had understated their anger at what the adventurers were doing. They were then able to retrace their steps to where they had paused before, with a bit more information on where other miners could be found. But that didn’t matter so much as what the map was telling them.

Looking at where the path split Branwen voiced the question they were all wondering. “So, where do we go from here?”

Jaheira looked at the area, then glanced at Harry, mouthing the word ‘map’ in a way that the two magic users and Branwen could not see. For a moment, Harry didn’t get it, then he did, and began to explain what he saw on his map in a whisper that even Jaheira and Khalid could barely hear.

You have earned + 50 Respect from Jaheira.

It looks as if Jaheira liked how quick you were to follow up on her idea.

“This one will lead back to the entrance way, or link back up with another tunnel that will do the same, given how it is going southwest” Jaheira relayed the information Harry was saying. “That one, the one that lies straight, takes us further south and east. Which I think will lead to the border of the mine, or perhaps a dead end.”

Harry nodded, looking at them all thoughtfully. “All those in favor of making certain that we can’t be attacked from behind say Aye.”

“Aye,” said every voice there, and Harry nodded. “Imoen, Minsc, you two lead the way again, the rest of us will follow up. Branwen, keep on checking the size of the tunnel as we go. We need to try and surprise whoever is behind this before they can try to get the jump on us.”

With that, the group once more began to move out of the known areas of the map, with Imoen and Minsc enlarging it once more and Harry and Branwen leading the others behind them, with Branwen slowly starting to fall back into the main group as she checked every yard or so of the mine’s walls. But it wasn’t the blind Jaheira and Khalid had explained which was the most dangerous thing they could come across in these mines. That honor lay at their feet, literally.

One minute Harry was stepping forward, and his foot trailed against something above the floor of the tunnel. As soon as the thought went through his mind that that wasn’t usual, there was a sound from one side, and small darts flashed out of the wall to one side.

You have tripped a snare, Dart Wall.

This trap was connected to a series of spring-loaded darts hidden in tiny alcoves on either side of the tunnel. These darts can range from simple metal or wooden darts to the magical variety. Luckily for your clumsy self, this trap seems to be loaded with normal metal darts, although the size of the trap still means it is dangerous. Dodge if you want to survive.

Harry started to dodge, while elsewhere, the rest of his band were still the same, with Dynaheir muttering imprecations and Branwen cursing like a sailor. The group began to take hits, not enough to get through their armor in most places but doing some damage. The only exceptions were Khalid and Jaheira. The enhanced Dexterity of half-elves came into play here, allowing Jaheira to dodge or use her buckler to deflect darts coming her way, while Khalid simply blocked most of them.

At the same time, several red dots moved in from the far end of the passageway as Imoen and Minsc raced back to the rest of the group.

They were halted and seemed to be embroiled in a fight just out of sight as arrows began to land among the company. But with Harry and Branwen in the lead, the others were largely protected by their shields and armor bodies. This let Khalid and Jaheira start to fire back with Edwin and Dynaheir following suit.

An arrow still got through Branwen’s chest plate, though it didn’t penetrate very far. Instead, it seemed to enrage the priestess, who roared a battle cry and charged forwards. “In Tempus’ name, you skulkers in the dark will feel my fury!”

“Branwen, wait!” Harry shouted, suddenly knowing what was going to happen even as he blocked still more arrows coming his way. He tried to take a step after her, but another trap was tripped behind him, this one a spear from the wall which stabbed into his leg, causing him

to collapse, using his one good leg to support him in a crouch as he held his tower shield in front of him.

To Harry's shock, Branwen didn't spring any traps and was able to close with the enemy. The archers instantly tried to switch targets to her, while Branwen shouted out, "The attackers are little lizard-like creatures with large back legs, claws and wielding short swords!"

Imoen and Minsc burst into sight then, joining up with Branwen and urging her back to the rest of the group as blinds on either side of them opened, revealing several more of the enemy while another opened up behind the party that they all had missed in the ceiling, dumping the kobolds out almost on top of Khalid, who danced back and away from them, nearly running into Jaheira's back. And this time, Harry could see what they were dealing with, and he yelled, "Kobolds! Khalid, 'ware behind!"

"Of course! Of course they are kobolds. How did I not see it earlier!?" Khalid stammered, already turning, dropping his bow to the floor of the tunnel and pulling out his sword from his item space, slashing out at two kobolds. They fell back in a welter of blood and gore, his powerful strike having bisected the one, and gone halfway through the others just before stopping.

A healing spell washed over Harry, and his wound started to disappear. He pushed himself to his knees, thrusting his shield to one side, catching a short sword wielded by a Kobold as the little creature attempted to charge forward to fight him hand-to-hand.

The next second, his sword flicked out, stabbing the thing through the roof of its mouth, and into its brain.

"Jaheira, you and Edwin, help Khalid at the back. Dynaheir, back Imoen up!"

With that, Harry charged into the small horde of goblin sized creatures to their front. As he did, Harry noticed where they had all come from. Instead of just hiding in small blinds in the walls, these creatures had devised small hideaways in the roof.

But Despite the initial effectiveness of their traps, the kobolds hadn't brought enough actual archers to the fight. And in close range, only Imoen was in danger from these creatures. Dynaheir used her spells to give the thief some room to move, and she sprinted behind Harry, before pulling out her short bow and attacking the kobolds from there.

Another pair of kobolds fell, one to Harry's blade, another to a stone from Jaheira. This seemed to take the fight out of the last few of them. They turned and ran, one of them being smashed down by Branwen's hammer as Harry saw the glowing red dots all turn yellow on his map.

Seeing this, Branwen shouted in joy. "Our enemies flee, my friends! After them, so that we may reward their cowardice with its just dessert in Tempus' name!"

“Yes! More but kicking for goodness!” Minsc bellowed, his voice even louder in the tunnel than Branwen’s had been.

Both warriors started forward, and Harry took a brief second to stare at in shock before racing after them, with Imoen on his heels. “Don’t, it’s a trick!”

But too late. The two warriors had chased the last of the kobolds down the tunnel into the dark beyond where Imoen and Minsc had run back to engage the kobolds when they first made themselves known. And there, as Harry had feared, were a series of traps.

Harry had barely reached Minsc tackling him to the floor when Branwen, a step ahead of the Ranger, tripped another trap. This one was a bear trap.

Your traveling companion, Branwen, has been caught in Bear Trap.

This is one of the simpler traps out there, made of two jaws of metal which close via a spring when the pressure pad within the trap is touched. Despite being a simple trap, it is extremely deadly, immobilizing the individual and badly injuring the limb caught within its jaws.

Further, the trap can be made deadlier in many ways, from serrated teeth to simply sprinkling the jaws with poison or even shit, which will make any wound taken fester quickly.

-40 base damage to the individual caught in this trap. Anyone caught in this trap is Immobilized.

Branwen cried out in pain as the jaws caught her leg mid-run, dumping her to the earth.

Biting his lip to keep from cursing, Harry rolled off of Minsc, ignoring his thanks, and looking up at the big man angrily as he pulled him to his feet. “Minsc, do me a favor and don’t go running off like that again!”

“Indeed, my large companion, chasing off after the enemy like that is not your task. Your task is to guard me. Where would I be without my stalwart defender, and what kind of honor would you do yourself or your Warrior Lodge if in so doing you died such an ignominious death?” Dynaheir asked as she joined them with the others trailing after, having slain the last few of the kobolds at range.

“Alas, fair Dynaheir is correct. Your protection should be uppermost in my mind at all times. But my warrior blood was up, and I could do not think clearly, no matter how hard Boo bit me,” Minsc replied, shaking his head. This was accompanied by a squeak from Boo, who suddenly was standing on his shoulder.

“Wherever did that rodent come from?” Edwin murmured, frowning.

Dynaheir did not reply, while Jaheira moved past them, kneeling down next to Branwen as Harry moved over, gripping the sides of the bear trap. With a grunt of effort, he released the trap, and Jaheira instantly began to heal Branwen’s wounded leg, as Branwen did the same

with her own healing spell. The combination of the two miner healing spells healed Branwen's leg, getting her health bar up to two-thirds full. She was still sore, but that was fine.

All of us are a little sore after this battle, really, Harry thought.

"In the future, Branwen, if you could perhaps exhibit some common sense, I would be very grateful!" Harry ground out, trying to keep his voice formal for a moment, before shaking his head and throwing his hands up as he stepped back, waving back the way they had come. "We **just** saw that these kobolds like traps a lot! And you not only ignored that but left the rest of us behind to chase after a few retreating kobolds."

Branwen looked annoyed at being dressed down like that but then shrugged her shoulders and nodded. "I will admit you are correct Harry, I did not anticipate that, nor did I think of the implications of traps. I will not do it again. But I will say I have never run into kobolds before, so their abilities are unknown to me."

Seeing the matter as finished, Harry explained what they knew about kobolds using his bestiary, then glanced at his map again before looking towards Imoen. "Imoen, I'm afraid we're going to have to be relying on you for all of our forward scouting from now on. Minsc, you can back her up, but always be a few steps behind her because Imoen is also going to be searching for traps as we go along."

Imoen winced. "My Detect Traps skill isn't all that good, and my Disarming Traps skill is even worse. I always more enjoyed training my Hide-In-Shadows skill, as well as my Pickpocketing."

While the others rolled their eyes at that, Harry simply shrugged his shoulders. "It is what it is. From what I understand, after a certain point the disarming skill simply becomes faster, not actually better, right?" When Imoen nodded, he went on. "Then that doesn't matter. So long as you can spot the traps in the first place, we can take our time or even go around traps when possible. I hope."

"Whatever we do, it will slow us down tremendously," Imoen warned.

"I refuse to put us all in danger if I can avoid it. Unless you're talking about hours on end for each trap in turn? Then I don't see a problem."

"Your willingness to put the well-being of your companions and Party Members above the need for speed has been recognized as the qualities of a good leader."

You have earned + 100 friendship points with Minsc, Imoen, and Khalid.

You have earned +200 Trust points with Dynaheir, Branwen, Jaheira and Edwin.

Both your formal Party Members and Traveling Companions seem to like the fact you are prioritizing their safety over any imagined advantage speed could give you.

Harry shook his head at that, dismissing the message as he wondered, not for the first time, what kind of leaders his fellow Adventurers were used to.

“In that case, I’ll start now by going down the rest of this passage,” Imoen began, already moving in that direction.

But Minsc interrupted her before she could do anything. “Wait!” When Imoen looked at him, Minsc looked a little conflicted and then sighed. He reached up to Boo, taking the giant miniature space hamster in his hand, holding Boo out to Imoen. “Boo believes that he can help you with the detecting of traps. He is a very wise giant miniature space hamster for all his youth, and his eyes are tiny gimlets, seeing everything!”

Imoen hesitantly reached out, letting the giant miniature space hamster crawl to her hand, then up her arm, giggling at the sensation, and giggling even more when Boo sat at the crook of her neck and shoulder, his whiskers ruffling her skin. The others all stared at this before looking at one another, wondering what to do, but neither Harry nor Imoen joined them. They were too busy staring at the message which had appeared in front of the Party Members.

Minsc has willingly passed his animal companion, Boo, to Imoen. This act of selflessness has earned Minsc + 1 to Willpower.

Note: Boo is an Animal Companion and can give certain buffs and additional abilities to those he travels with (upon).

For Minsc, this came in the form of an enhanced defense against mental magics. In the case of Imoen, this has added 20% to her Detect Traps skill. Boo will also aid in her situational awareness, being able to look in a different direction than Imoen and can see almost as good as an elf in the dark.

Whether or not that last is normal for giant miniature space hamsters, you cannot say. But Boo’s ability to help in various ways is more proof, if you needed any, that there is something special about this little creature.

Dynaheir could not see this note, and she raised a hand to her face, rubbing at her eyes in annoyance. “Minsc, I realize that you are... overly attached to your tiny companion, but surely this is not the time for japery.”

Having seen the same message as Harry’s other party members – presumably since it dealt with him and Boo directly - Minsc seemed to vibrate in place for a moment, his eyes alight with delight, but before he said anything, Harry clamped a hand on his shoulder, whispering as Imoen answered Dynaheir “Not now, my large friend. We will talk about the magnificence that is Boo when we decide to bring Dynaheir into my and Imoen’s secrets, all right?”

Pouting Minsc stayed silent, but the effort was hard on him, and when he turned to Harry, Harry nodded firmly. “Yes, Minsc, we saw it too. Boo really is special.”

That was enough for Minsc, who fell silent.

“It’s fine Dynaheir.” Imoen said at the same time Harry and Minsc were talking. She knew that that twenty percent would help her tremendously in spotting any traps, so she quickly headed the argument off, although she didn’t read off the message. “It’s the thought that counts, right? Thanks, big guy. I’ll take good care of Boo, and he’ll help me take care of all of us.”

Despite his inner delight, Minsc nodded gravely and waggled a finger in front of Boo’s head. “You be good. Keep silent. Even your small squeaks are mighty indeed at times. And stay on Imoen’s shoulder. She is not me to be comfortable with you skittering all over her body in such a way.”

Imoen blanched at that, but she quickly shook her head, adding her own agreements to Minsc’s in an undertone as she turned away. She then pulled Hide-In-Shadows around her and heading forward from the party. On the heels of that notification, Harry saw another.

Imoen has activated skill: **Detect Traps.**

This is a Thief skill that allows one to do precisely what it says: detect any and all traps or alarms in the area around the Thief. So long as the Thief’s skill is good enough anyway.

Disarming traps is also part of the Detect Traps skill. But disarming them is somewhat more difficult, the Thief performing at -10% of his or her Detect Traps score.

Due to being a Party Member, you too will see the traps Imoen finds, but you will not disarm them. Detect Traps is a passive thief skill, so i’s passive ability to see traps can be shared once the Thief first sees a trap. Disarming them is an active knowledge-based skill and cannot be shared between Party Members.

Once more, Khalid and Minsc saw this message and at first looked surprised, then gleeful, before quickly controlling their expressions before any of the non-party Members could notice. Khalid then moved over to his wife, murmuring something so low that only another half-elf could’ve heard, and her ears twitched a bit, as she turned to look at him, then over to Harry, nodding her head once in acknowledgment of how important that skill could be in the future.

As she moved forward with Minsc following on her heels in his own Hide-In-Shadows, the others cautiously followed the two scouts, now looking much warier, keeping eyes both behind and to the sides, where Harry had begun to test the walls as Branwen had been, listening as she instructed him for the different sounds. “Khalid, you and Jaheira both looked appalled at the fact that you didn’t think of kobolds and surprised that it actually is kobolds. Why is that?”

“Kobolds are a natural kind of enemy to find in a mine like this. They can see in the dark as well as we half-elves can and are at home underground like dwarves and other subterranean species are. Further, they are known to be able to create traps quite well. And yet the

sophistication of this operation, the way that trap sprung, the multiple layers? Those are things you would not expect from a kobold. Not under normal circumstances,” Jaheira replied to both of them.

“I have not had many dealings with the small creatures before. They are rather beneath a powerful mage like myself. But that does beg a follow-on question,” Edwin began.

At the same time, Harry looked ahead of them, having just seen a notification of Imoen removing the trap. In contrast, a bright red line had appeared on his map, only to disappear a second later.

Imoen has detected a trap. Imoen has disarmed a trap. Imoen has gained +10 throwing darts, one long string, one pressure pad.

Imoen has gained 50 experience.

It gave her experience, which was nice, as was the fact that Imoen would now have the plans for a similar trap.

“Who then is doing their thinking for them, and how could whoever it is a force the kobolds into following orders?” Edwin finished.

“Good questions,” Harry agreed, although he was surprised to not see a pop-up coming up because of it. He supposed that was a little too obvious considering everything that was going on and what they had already learned. “Ones we will only be able to discover if we keep clearing this mine.”

Imoen came back then, reporting to the others what Harry had already seen on his map. “I ran into a few traps, but the tunnel dead-ends ahead of us. I searched around for any hidden alcoves and found a small trapped one.” She held up a few glass vials, shaking them. These are empty, but they were all placed there as if they were still precious.”

Harry nodded, looking at the vials. “Keep them for now. We might find a use for them at some point. For parts of your own snares if nothing else.”

She nodded and placed them back in her item space, causing Branwen to shake her head, but she said nothing. She simply put down the idea of someone being able to actually utilize their Item Space in a timely manner as something only a rookie Adventurer would think, not having realized yet that Harry and all of his Party Members could indeed do that very thing as Edwin had.

Dynaheir merely watched on, humming thoughtfully.

“Let’s move back the way we came then, and Imoen, you’re still in the lead. Keep detecting traps.”

“You expect there to be more behind us?” Edwin inquired, frowning lightly.

“Luck works both ways. Just because we tripped a few traps going forward doesn’t mean there aren’t any that we could now trip going back,” Harry shrugged.

This actually proved to be the case. There was one trap that the Adventurers hadn’t sprung on the way. But despite that, they were back at the intersection where they had met the second group of slaves and miners. And since there was no choice but to turn left, they did so now. With Imoen in the lead and Minsc following up, Harry once more set their formation in two parallel lines.

Soon, the tunnel split once more. One tunnel moved north towards the entranceway, while the main tunnel continued forward, slowly curving back north as well. Another offshoot seemed to curve back the way they came, a far sharper curve than the tunnel they had been following, while right past that point, another passageway could be seen on the left. Deciding to take the one that went back the way they came, Imoen led the group in that direction.

But for all of their wariness about traps, they haven’t run into any yet. What they did find was that this tunnel started to dip down.

As the tunnel’s dip downward began to be accompanied by steps cut out of the ground next to the mine rails, Harry called a halt, shaking his head and having the group retrace their steps, raising his voice to bring back Minsc and Imoen. “We’ll want to finish up this level first before heading down to the next level. That way, we can’t be attacked from behind when we’re in bad shape and heading for the surface, and the miners and slaves are safe from further assaults.”

Imoen frowned thoughtfully, staring around them. “In that case, maybe I should lay out my own traps?”

Harry looked at the others, and everyone agreed it was a good idea, although not for the same reason Harry did once it had occurred to him. *I wonder if her traps will appear on my map too? That way, if they are tripped, we’ll know of it immediately.*

Working for a few moments, Imoen laid out several simple tripwires attached to a few bear traps. The bear traps were easily the heavier items from the new materials she had been gathering since starting to detect and take apart the traps she found. And they did indeed appear on Harry’s maps, which he was overjoyed to see.

With that done, they retraced their steps once more, heading back the way they had come to the large intersection. From there, they headed west along the main mine rail they had been following toward the other passageway leading off to the left. There, Imoen and Minsc found not more traps but another ambush.

Harry watched as red dot started to propagate on his map, then Minsc returned to report to them. “Imoen says she is not certain what is behind them, but there are at least two of those odd blind spots on the wall and seven kobolds waiting.”

Thinking quickly, Harry looked around at the group, Especially the two wizards. "Can you two modify your spells, your Magic Missile spells in particular? I think only one or two strikes from that would kill a kobold, and if you could do that, we could use the two of you to do a lot of damage to the group of enemies we can see, while the rest of us form up to deal with the ones hiding behind the fake walls."

"Hah! Alas, it does not work quite that way, although it would be most interesting if it could," Edwin announced with a sigh. "Spells of that nature cannot be changed in any such matter. They must have a single initial target."

"Ah well, it was worth a try." Harry shrugged his shoulders, then looked over at Jaheira. "Would you mind using a Tangling Vines trap? With fire being unusable down here, I think we want to save our more offensive spells for later. After all, who knows how big this mine is."

Jaheira nodded and prepared to cast the spell while Harry turned back to the others. "The same goes for you two, I'm afraid. Conserve your spells, for now, one Acid Arrow from you to start with Edwin, and then the next fight, Dynaheir, you can lead us off with your own."

"A most intelligent plan," Dynaheir approved as Imoen came out of the darkness ahead of them. While Minsc had reported back, she had continued her way forward, using Hide-In-Shadows to slip around the kobolds.

"I found a few traps on the other side of this ambush and a few more of those fake walls," she reported. "Anyone wants to bet that the kobolds we can see will break as soon as possible and try to retreat back through those traps to pull us in?"

"Were you able to disarm them?"

"Yep!" Imoen smirked. "I was, and then I put down a few of my own right in front of the second group of fake walls. Although I have to say, I could only see the blinds because of Boo. I passed right by one of them until he nearly bit my ear off," Imoen admitted with a wince.

"Still, that was a great idea, Imoen," Harry enthused before sending a nod to Minsc, causing Minsc to puff himself up with pride at his little companion. Then Harry pulled his sword up and readied his shield. "Minsc, you're at the back of the group just in case. There's not enough room in this tunnel for more than two of us in the front line. Imoen, center with Dynaheir, Jaheira and Edwin. Khalid, Minsc, be ready to switch to melee weapons if we are attacked from behind, but start the fight with bows."

Imoen had already pulled out her own bow and stood ready next to Jaheira, nudging her in the side with a cheerful wink. "I bet I kill one before you do." Jaheira rolled her eyes, but she was smiling even so. Imoen's irrepressible nature had rubbed off on her slightly, not that she would ever admit it. *That might well encourage the girl*, the half-elf thought, as she followed the front ranks forward.

As soon as Jaheira saw the enemy, her hands gestured, and she completed the spell Jaheira had prepared in her mind, sending out Tangling Vines.

The group of kobolds, only one of whom was an archer, were all entangled quickly, and Harry turned aside, stepping in front of one of the marked fake walls. When it opened up, Harry was already slicing down, cutting the head off a kobold. Another took his shield to the face before being stabbed in turn.

On the other side of the tunnel, Branwen was doing the same. Meanwhile, another fake wall had opened up behind them, as Harry had feared. Branwen's ability to find them was somewhat hit or miss. Khalid continued his long-range fire while Minsc shifted this broadsword, slicing not only one, but three kobolds in half in one Cleave, sending their entrails and body parts flying everywhere. Imoen, the two wizards and Jaheira ignored this portion of the battle, raining fire down on the trapped kobolds ahead of them.

Soon all of them were down, and Harry moved forward with Branwen. "Anything else beyond the next portion of this ambush?"

"Five dead slaves," Imoen answered bluntly from behind him, shaking her head. "And two dead kobolds. At least this group seems to have fought back."

Harry nodded, and he and Branwen led the way forward. They stepped in front of the next pair of fake walls, then smashed them down when they didn't seem to open.

The kobolds inside had been hiding there, not hearing the sound of their traps going off, and being cowardly, they hadn't wished to reveal themselves. Harry had barely a moment to notice the yellow dots signifying their panicked status on his map before Branwen was smashing two of them down with her hammer. One of them tried to get past Harry, too frightened to even strike at him, but Harry didn't let that stop him from slicing the creature's head off. The next second and a sling stone from Dynaheir took the last in the side of the head, crushing its skull.

The battle over Harry asked Branwen if she wanted to say something over the dead slaves, which she did, praising the miners for fighting back against their killers in Tempus' name. When she finished, they all make their way back the way they had come. From there, they began to make their way straight north. This meant they intersected with the main cavern before turning west along another passageway there, finding a group of slaves, nine all told and freeing them to head back to the entrance.

A little further to the west, they discovered an ambush point and the bodies of four more slaves. But once more, the kobolds didn't prove any danger to the prepared, wary Adventurers. Once you realized they were there and disarmed the traps, all of the advantages shifted immediately to the adventuring party.

Harry had Imoen put down a few traps here and there, then the group turned back to the entranceway. There Harry reported to the guards, telling them what they had found.

“Have you discovered our missing companions?” One of the guards demanded before he could speak. “You sent all the useless slaves back here but didn’t find our friends?”

Growling, Minsc made to move forward, but Harry blocked him with an arm across his chest. “Those slaves are people too, and we won’t be responsible for their deaths. And if you need to think about it in those terms, they can do more good for the mine by working the walls right here or just waiting until we’ve cleared it instead of dying. As for your fellow guardsmen? We haven’t seen anything of them yet. Could they have gone down to the next level for some reason?”

The guards all looked at one another, then sighed as one. “God damn it Marl...” One of them muttered.

“Aye, Sir Adventurer, they might’ve. Marl, he’s got a new sweetheart ya see, and old Emerson, he offered two hundred gold for any information about what’s been attacking our miners. He, he might’ve led the other morons down there. Damn it, we should’ve said something when we saw him pick out his brother and the other two hotheads.” One of the guards groaned.

“Crap,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. “You realize that depending on how much time has passed there might not be much chance of them being found alive, right? If we had gone after them right away, that would be different, but clearing the first floor has taken us too much time.” *And there are way too many traps around for me to let us just barrel ahead after them.*

“Aye, we know,” One of the other guards scowled, shaking his head. “Ain’t your fault, sir. Idiots will be idiots, and young idiots are the worst.”

“Well, regardless, we’re now prepared to go down to the next level of the mine, so we’ll keep our eyes open. Who knows, we might get lucky,” Harry answered, although his tone implied he wasn’t very hopeful. “We won’t be back to report like this again until the mine is cleared, but I wanted to give you a heads up on what’s been going on.”

“That’s more than the other adventuring party did, that’s for sure,” One of the guards nodded his head in thanks to Harry, who returned to his party. After making certain they had explored the entirety of this floor, he led the way back to the mine shaft, which began to slope downwards. The guards, and two missing miners would have to be found below.

When they reached the ramp, they found that the trap that Imoen had laid there remained there, a green bar across Harry’s map and in his party members’ eyes. After they moved over it, Imoen took the lead, with Minsc behind her to back her up once more as

everyone else moved into the line formation, which Harry was starting to think of as their normal marching formation.

The sloping tunnel started to curve inward, becoming a spiral heading downwards, and soon they were on the second level of the mine, directly beneath the first one. "Now, what are the odds that this area is laid out precisely like the first floor," Harry murmured as he looked around, before sighing as he saw only one tunnel leading out of the small area they had come out onto. "Right, of course not. That would be too easy."

The group moved off without further comment, the first tunnel swiftly splitting into two. One continued forward in front of the group, while the other branch went off at a ninety-degree angle or straight north on Harry's map. Harry didn't like that and had Imoen once more laid out a few traps behind them before following the mine rails forward, although he was noticing a worrisome sight as Imoen continued to use Hide-In-Shadows and Detect Traps at the same time, she seemed to be moving a little slower. As if the exercise was slowly exhausting her.

They soon came to an area where another branch led off north of the main tunnel. Past that was a much larger intersection, where the mine rails also split. There, Imoen had paused once more, the reason obvious to Harry thanks to his map: two dozen red dots overlapping one another to either side in the intersection and then still more along the second side passage. There seemed to be seven kobolds along that second side passage, along with several red marks of traps and even more kobolds on the other side of the traps in the main intersection, so many that the whole area looked covered in red. *That, that is a lot of kobolds.*

But to his surprise, Minsc and Imoen did not come right back. Instead, Imoen, showing a bit too much daring than sense in Harry's mind, moved back, then headed north along the second side passage. Imoen then began to make her way back and down a new tunnel there, which seemed to connect to the previous side passage and then on to the main intersection on the other side. With that done, Imoen rejoined the group by taking that first side passage, coming up behind Khalid right before deactivating her Hide-In-Shadows. "Hey, buddy."

"GAAHH!" Khalid yelled, though Imoen had the presence of mind to cover his mouth, while behind her, Minsc appeared looking a little sheepish.

"Don't do that, girl! I don't want my husband's stutter to become even worse!" Jaheira growled, although for the life of him, Harry couldn't tell if she was joking or not.

Deciding not to ask, Harry simply looked at their two scouts and had them tell the rest of his traveling companions what he already saw on his map while Harry quickly made up a plan. "Alright, I think now is the right time to start using more spells. Jaheira, you should cast Tangling Vines into the main intersection. Dynaheir, follow up with a Stinking Cloud. We'll stay back and kill the kobolds at the range while Branwen and I guard that first passage. Minsc and Khalid will be on our left flank just in case enough of them think to come around that way."

Everyone nodded, as Harry's plan was simple and made sense, not even Edwin becoming annoyed at his small role in the plan. Moments later, everyone had formed up into a new position. Given how they had to spread out, they fell out of formation, but it would work.

Harry and Branwen charged forward, then quickly skirted into the side passage, smashing into a few of the kobolds there, while Dynaheir behind them launched a spell in the face of the group of kobolds that had quickly grabbed up their weapons and turned to the adventurers directly in the center of the main passage. A thick smoky fog bloomed out from her hands, creating a wide area of fog directly above the heads of the kobolds, descending quickly. The next second, the Tangling Vine spell hit, trapping the few kobolds who had avoided the Stinking Cloud.

While Harry and Branwen held the side passage against the kobolds there, Jaheira, Khalid, and Edwin cleaned up the first area. But as Harry had been worried about, there were a lot of kobolds ahead of them. Many began to move around them via the other main tunnel, coming at the Adventurers from the side passages. Khalid and Minsc moved forward quickly, guarding their back, and with the Tangling Vine and Stinking Cloud keeping their original line of advance safe, this allowed the Adventurers to deal with these attacks pretty well.

The fight slowly turned into a grind, with the kobolds attempting to get past the four Warriors. Meanwhile, Jaheira, Imoen and the two mages attempted to kill the still significant number of unconscious or trapped kobolds in the intersection before they could rejoin the fight. This worked, but Harry and Minsc both took minor wounds, and the few archers on the other side struck Jaheira and Edwin, forcing Jaheira to use two more of her healing spells.

Soon, though, the kobolds were dead or running, and Harry shouted out, "Push them, we don't want any of them to get away! Dynaheir, everyone bar Minsc and Khalid, with me! We'll break through here and flank the ones they are fighting."

Bringing the long-range Adventurers to bear on the group in front of Harry and Branwen allowed them to break them, and once the kobolds were running, cutting them down took no time at all. Once that was done, Branwen and Harry led the others around, moving to the right of the larger passageway to the north of the original one, then coming back down the first side passage, pinning the surviving Kobolds between them, Minsc and Khalid. At that point, the kobolds broke but had nowhere to go, and all that was left was killing them.

Soon they were back in front of the intersection, where Imoen began to disarm the traps while Jaheira looked over Minsc and Harry's wounds. Meanwhile, Harry noted a few body parts scattered around, while his Gamer system announced he had found the body parts of three more slaves.

From a small alcove to one side, a muttered voice whispered, "We're saved!"

Harry turned in that direction and called out, "Are you a miner or a slave? Whichever you are, the way to the upper level is clear. I suggest running."

To Harry's surprise, two men stepped out of hiding. One of them pushed his way out of a crate, where he had somehow fitted his extremely lanky frame into it like a contortionist. Another man climbed down from a support beam, where a portion of the roof directly above the support beam had fallen away, leaving a small alcove. He was dirty and grimy, but he was still alive and extremely thankful for it, bowing profusely to the adventurers.

Miner Beldin and Miner Kylee.

These miners are some of the youngest and fittest of the miners you have seen. They are also perhaps the stupidest. But then again, it is said that the gods favor fools since your timely arrival seems to have saved them from the kobolds. Or perhaps eventual starvation if they could have remained hidden.

This was followed by another message:

Congratulations. You have found and apparently rescued all the miners and slaves in the Dungeon. You still must find:

Slaves: 40/40

Guards: 4/8

Find them all or their remains and identify them if you want to complete this prerequisite to clearing the Dungeon.

"I saw my life flashing before my eyes. Every time, one of them would pick his nose or shake his head, swore they'd smell me or something," the miner named Kylee said, pulling Harry from his reading.

Beldin also nodded profuse thanks. "I knew twas just a matter of time 'fore one of those little critters began to poke things just for fun."

"Hah, you'd know all about poking things just for fun, wouldn't ya, Beldin?" Kylee joked.

"Oh hush up, willja, I tol' you, I was so drunk, I didn't know she were ya mom," Beldin replied.

Resolutely not looking in Edwin, Jaheira or Imoen's direction, Harry interrupted the brain trust before it could get going. "That's fine, but why were you down here anyway? We were told that the miners and slaves had been pulled back to the upper level."

Both men looked a little embarrassed. "We, er, yeah, we was told not to come down here except with the guards. But, um, we saw a guard squad coming down here and um, we had found a really good vein of iron a few weeks back. And we both thought we could sneak down, maybe make our weekly quota and then some, and then have the guards protect us as we head back up. Only, er, those kobolds came out of nowhere, and um, we ain't seen the guards since."

Harry stared at them, then his hand rose and smacked into his forehead with such force that he actually took two points of damage. Whether or not it was because of the hit or because of that bit of gross stupidity, he didn't know. *Damn, the Advanced Adventuring System was spot on with these two.* "Fine, whatever. As I said, the way back to the ramp up to the first level is clear. "If you run, you might be able to get there without any further trouble. But before you go, can you tell me anything about this place?"

"I can do that. There be two places of importance on this floor. The first is da waterway. You'll find it straight ahead of you 'long the main passage. It curves a bit, and on the other side of another crossway is da waterway. It's basically a pond, with a wooden bridge set into it," Kylee offered.

"At that large crossing, you'll find a track that leads southwest to a large cavern. It's da central gathering area for the second floor, where most of us used to spend our hours off," Beldin added.

Eyes flicking upward, Harry was somewhat annoyed that this information hadn't given him anything new on his map. Still, at least I know somewhat more what's out there and what to shoot for. "Anything else?"

"The deeper you go, the more tunnels ya'll find. A lot o' small offshoots, they'll link back up around standing areas of iron ore that are bein' worked." Belkin replied before shuddering. "Or were, any road."

"Yeah, most've what you'll find is heap lots of those little critters. We saw bands of them passing by," Kylee agreed. "Five or six of them came while we've been stuck down here. Or maybe it was the same one each time? Who's to say?"

That was helpful, and Harry nodded his thanks for the information, then gestured them on their way. Unlike with the miners and slaves they had found on the first floor, Harry made no move to help lead these two to safety. In his mind, the stupidity they had shown meant they were honestly not worth the time. And besides, the route back to the ramp was clear anyway.

Edwin, Dynaheir and Jaheira all thought much the same and spent several minutes actually agreeing with one another on that score, exchanging jokes at the miner's expense. Meanwhile, Imoen and Minsc pulled out some jerky, eating a few bites while Khalid and Harry conferred on what they should do.

Then Edwin said something actually disturbing. "I find it most amusing that you didn't mention the traps the pink-haired one put down before sending those buffoons on their way."

Harry and Imoen's eyes widened, and Imoen raced after the two miners, shouting out, "WAIT!!" in a loud voice. For a moment, as Edwin guffawed and the others looked a little sick, all of them having forgotten the same thing, Harry stared at nothing, worried he would soon see some kind of message informing him that he and his party were now murderers.

But then, Imoen came back, shaking her head in shock.

"What's wrong Imoen? W, were you too late?" Dynaheir nearly whispered, while Branwen closed her eyes, praying to Tempus.

"Nope. I... they were already past them! They didn't even notice, just passed right over them." Imoen said, utterly shocked. "I er, I told them to go straight back to the entrance and to watch out, but um... I don't think it was necessary."

"Tsk. I suppose it is right then what they say: the gods favor fools," Edwin snarked.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at that, and then asked, "Well, with that, um, taken care of, where do you all think we should go from here?"

"Let's hug the outer edge of the mining area for now. I don't want us to get into a position where we could be surrounded by several of these small offshoots Kylee mentioned," Khalid stuttered out his suggestion.

"Call him idiot number two. It is a far more accurate label," Edwin snorted.

Despite the Red Wizards snark, everyone approved of the plan, and they went north. From there, they traveled roughly eastward, with Imoen finding still more traps until they came upon a small guard post now manned by six kobolds.

"Right, there're no traps, so we should be able to wipe this group out quickly. Let's just make certain none of them get away," Harry whispered after Imoen and Minsc rejoined them. "Same as before, guys. Let's take them at a run. The only way kobolds can hurt us is with archers, so let's make certain we can take that out of the equation quick."

With that, Harry and Branwen led the way, smashing into the small group of kobolds. However, just before they struck, Khalid, once more at the back, twisted around, staring into the darkness behind him for a second. An instant later, a kobold came out of Hide-In-Shadows, stabbing at him. He deflected it with his bow before pulling out his sword and shield from his Item Space, reequipping them quickly enough to surprise the kobold, who quickly fell to his blade. But there were still more of them coming out of Hide-In-Shadows from directly behind the group, a group of eight.

"Edwin, backup Khalid, Jaheira, you too!"

Normally, against enemies like kobolds, that would've been enough. Even with surprise on the side of the kobolds, there weren't enough of them. But, a second later, Harry looked down as he felt something under his foot twist. "FUCK!"

A yellow kind of magical energy flew out from one of the walls, exploding amid his friends, and Harry read out a message.

You have tripped Fear Snare.

This is a Snare created around a magic scroll primed with magic and now waits for a final release.

The spell Fear has been visited upon your party and traveling companions.

Due to your high Willpower, you have resisted the spell, Fear.

Khalid, Jaheira, and Imoen and Minsc all felt it. Minsc instantly began to roar, the fear forcing him into his Berserker state, as he lashed out at friend and foe alike, nearly cutting Jaheira in half, missing by a hair's breadth thanks to the fact she was already running away but still catching her on her side with the guard of his sword hard enough to toss her off her feet, where the normally self-controlled half-elf scrambled, before getting to her feet and running off. Khalid also fell under the spell's influence, racing after his wife down the tunnel further east.

Imoen had worse luck. She was in the interior of their formation and bolted straight south down the other passageway the guard post had been designed around. Within seconds, her foot caught on another rope, triggering another trap there.

Imoen has activated Bear Trap.

Imoen has lost -twenty to health. Imoen is now incapacitated and immobilized.

"AAAAGGGGGHHH!" Imoen cried out in pain, the cry echoing around the mine.

The cry wrenched at Harry even as he slew a kobold in front of him and shouted orders to the two mages. "Dynaheir, Edwin, come forward here with Branwen and me. Leave Minsc alone for now. He can handle himself."

"You do not have to tell me twice!" Edwin shouted as he barely dodged around a sword thrust, feeling the blade cut into his robes before he returned fire with a Magic Missile to the face. It was gross overkill, but it still saved his life and allowed him to fall back to Dynaheir and Harry and Branwen while Minsc bellowed and chopped at another kobold to one side.

With the two warriors forging a path for them, they made their way back the way they came to a little offshoot heading after Imoen. By the time they got to her, Imoen's pain had brought her out of the fear trap. As Harry helped her pull the bear trap off of her leg, Imoen whimpered, shaking her head in shock. "S, sorry! I never even saw that one." She then was actually able to smile at Harry despite the pain of her leg. "I, it looks like Boo and I both screwed up there."

Harry nodded but said nothing more, simply lifting her into his arms, hugging Imoen to him while Branwen began to use a few healing spells on the woman's leg. After looking around, he sighed, then looked at Branwen. "You all should stay here. I'm going to see if I can find Jaheira and Khalid. Hopefully, they didn't rush right from one battle into another."

“And if they did?” Edwin demanded harshly. “It is very clear that when it comes to Mind Magics, both of them are liabilities, the male worse than the female admittedly, but still.”

“Do you have a point, Thayan? Or are you just looking to vent your spleen?” Dynaheir questioned tartly.

“It is simple woman, so simple that even a Witch from the wilds of Rasheman should be able to see what I am implying. If we are to run into similar traps, then we should think about leaving such liabilities behind. Perhaps they could guard the way back up for us if they can make themselves useful at all.”

“It matters not what you think, wizard, for Tempus has given us a way to combat such fears. Remove Fear is a priestly spell that I have in abundance, and I can break the spell of any such trap if I am quick enough to catch all thus impaired before they can run away.”

“Good to know, but let’s save that for an actual battle. Hopefully, we won’t need it right now.” With that, Harry moved off, seeming to completely ignore Edwin’s words until he said over his shoulder, “I will remember that suggestion the next time that you are a liability in a battle, Edwin.”

“As if that could have her happen to one of my puissance,” Edwin shot back.

Harry was grateful to find that Minsc had already begun to come out of his Berserker mentality, apparently having slammed his head into one of the supports with enough force to knock himself out temporarily. He shifted to his feet, rubbing at his bald pate self-consciously. “Minsc is sorry, friend Harry. Without Boo, I am even more susceptible to dastardly Mind Magics than normal. I could only turn aside and aim my mighty blows away from fair Dynaheir.”

“It’s alright, Minsc. You were still a major help, protecting our back while we went after Imoen. Thank you,” Harry replied, knowing that was the only reason why Edwin and maybe even Dynaheir had survived given the trap and how close the kobolds had come to them. This caused Minsc to tear up and grab Harry in a bear hug, but Harry dodged, shaking his head. “None of that, Minsc! We need to find Khalid and Jaheira.”

“Ah, you are right, of course,” Minsc shook his head. “Let us find our fragile friends before they come to further mischief.”

Thankfully for the two half-elves, their fear had continued to send them in the same direction, continuing in the direction that the party had been going, around the northern edge of the mine heading east. They had run into a dead-end there. Harry found them both huddling against the wall, looking as if they had tripped at least another trap. However, Harry hadn’t seen any notification of Khalid doing so. When he walked up to them, they looked at Harry and Minsc as if they were going to bolt away, but Harry simply stood there, blocking the way back

towards the rest of the mines, and spoke softly and gently. "Jaheira, Khalid, it's us. Your friends."

"Indeed," Minsc boomed, which caused both half-elves to flinch, not that Minsc noticed. "We are your companions and brothers-in-arms, much evil have we slain, and much more will we continue to kick going forward. But you need to steal your heart against the fear that you are feeling, for it is the work of the weevils of evil, do not let the whispering musings of the fearful vileness take control of you, for it is their own fear that they are projecting upon you, for they see the righteous but kicking that we will bring upon them!"

"Yes, thank, you Minsc," Harry laughed, shaking his head and leaning against the wall. Why don't you go back and get the others and bring them up here. I haven't seen any more trouble on the way, and hopefully, that means we won't see any more trouble for a second."

Of course, Harry's words were simply too good for the universe to pass up, and just as Minsc and the others came from the southern passage moving towards where Jaheira and Khalid were still trembling against the far wall of the dead end, a group of seven kobolds came up behind them.

And instead of being mostly armed with short swords, all of these kobolds were armed with arrows and bows. They began to fire at them the instant they saw the adventurers, forcing the party to dodge or evade.

Yet in response, Harry and the others though simply shifted to their own long-range weapons and began to fire back at them, with Harry striding forward and the others forming up behind him, still blocking Jaheira and Khalid from fleeing entirely. "Dynaheir, Edwin, one spell each, conserve your Magic Missiles," Harry ordered.

Edwin was tempted to use Magic Missiles because he was contrary but did not because soon enough, they had further trouble as Harry saw an announcement.

You have been in the Dungeon long enough for a respawn to occur. Respawn points have activated on the first and second floors.

Note: Respawn rate is currently set at three hours. Respawn times will increase with every Heart Stone destroyed. Destroy all Heart Stoens to stop enemies from respawning at all.

And one aspect of the tunnel fighting that none of them had thought of yet was how far the noise of combat could spread in the mine tunnels. This was not the same thing as the outside of the gnoll fortress with the heavy rain to cover their actions.

Before the Adventurers could deal with the second group of patrolling kobolds, the same group of Hide-In-Shadows using kobolds that had attacked them from behind appeared once more, charging towards Dynaheir and the now-healed Imoen as they held the right flank of the group. And from behind the archers that they had previously been fighting came the

sounds of more than two dozen kobolds, all racing down the passages towards them from the large intersection they had previously wiped out.

“Minsc, fall back and provide cover for Dynaheir and Imoen on the right. Branwen forward with me. Edwin, Dynaheir, try to keep up the pressure on the archers, and use your Stinking Cloud,” He said, as one of their arrows nearly smacked into his shoulder, bouncing off of the chest plate.

Such was the number of enemies coming at them that even Edwin did not make a comment. Instead, Branwen brandished her hammer to the sky, shouting out, “In Tempus’s name!”

Branwen has cast Spiritual Hammer. Calling upon her god, this spell brings into existence a magical hammer. This weapon made of pure faith strikes as a magical weapon with a bonus of +1 for every 6 levels of the caster. The base damage inflicted when it scores a hit is exactly the same as a normal war hammer.

The glare of the hammer that Branwen was now wielding seemed to take the attacking kobolds aback, and Harry charged into their midst without even thinking about it, laying out sword and shield, turning the battle in an instant. Branwen followed him in with the bellow of laughter. “Yes, yes that is the way, into the enemy, let Tempus decide the righteous!”

At the back of the kobolds group, the archers began to fall back, one of their dots turning yellow on Harry’s map, while on the other side of the battle along the right passageway, Minsc had barreled into the group of attacking kobolds there, smashing them over like nine pins, and was now dealing with them along with Imoen and her short bow.

But the last thing that Harry wanted was for one of them to get away, knowing there were still more kobolds out there. Seeing more of the Kobolds now starting to flee thanks to his and Branwen’s charge, he cursed and was about to use one of his own blood may magic spells to stop them when suddenly Tangling Vines began to appear all around the archers. The spell caught all of them, including the kobolds who had already turned to flee and the back of the group that it charged forward into short sword range.

Jaheira and Khalid came out from where they had been hiding at the far end of the cul-de-sac, with Khalid’s bow in his hand and Jaheira’s sling already launching a stone. Both of them looked grimly determined to work off any embarrassment on the kobolds, and the battle swiftly began to ebb out for lack of living enemies.

The moment the battle ended, Jaheira turned to Harry and the others. “I have to apologize for myself and my husband. That Fear spell captured both of us in its grip, and we could not escape. I am... heh... afraid that even I am at times susceptible to such as that, especially when I do not have a moment to prepare myself beforehand.”

With his Advanced Adventurer System, Harry could tell there was a bit more to it in Jaheira's case. Like Imoen, she was dealing with a 'minor claustrophobe' status ailment. This seemed to accrue a -10 to Willpower, which meant they were both more susceptible to mental attacks. In Imoen's case, it had begun the moment they had entered the Dungeon. For Jaheira, it had begun when they had come down to this level, and Harry had missed it, which he cursed himself for now.

But Harry wasn't going to point that out to the proud half-elf and waved her words and Khalid's following nod away. "No apologies necessary. You weren't the only ones affected."

Imoen threw an arm around Khalid's shoulders, squeezing briefly, dealing with her own brush with the Fear spell as she did most things: by humor. "Yep, that's us, the scaredy-cat quartet. Hey, that sounds like a troubadour band, and you two are already Harpers, so..."

Minsc thrust out his jaw, straightening his back to add to his formidable height as he glowered down at Imoen. "Minsc is not a scaredy-cat! Minsc has not ever been a scaredy-cat, no matter what some mean people back in my Lodge might've thought when I was young before I grew strong enough to hurl them through the Lodge walls. Minsc simply did not have Boo with him. If he had, then no amount of magical whisperings or fearful mutterings would've bothered him!"

"I understand big guy," Imoen soothed patting him on the arm, "and I really do. But Boo's been a major help to me too. Unless he can give you the ability to detect traps, I'm afraid he has to stay with me for a bit."

"Let it only for it be for a bit then," Minsc grumbled, actually pouting for a moment while he contemplated the giant miniature space hamster on Imoen's shoulder.

Dynaheir put her hand on his other shoulder, reaching up to do so. "She is right, large one. Your... your little creature is performing a necessary service to the party." She sounded as if saying that was like pulling teeth, but still went on doggedly. "After all, these enemies do not fight with honor or even courage, not even the courage of most evil creatures. They fight from ambush and traps. And in that, Imoen is our best bet."

"Truly, but where did those enemies come from? Both groups seem to have come from the area of the mines that we had already cleared. Surely they could not have moved back into them in such numbers and so short a time from elsewhere in the mine," Branwen began, then her eyes widened. "Unless..."

Harry nodded at her, then looked around at the others. "I think this place has been turned into a dungeon," he said bluntly, finally imparting the knowledge he and his formal 'Party Members' had seen when they had finished talking with the mine boss. "Which means we're not just looking for miners or clues as to what the kobolds are doing, we're looking for the Heart Stones and the Dungeon Boss."

“Yes!” Branwen shouted in tandem with Minsc, who Harry supposed must have either forgotten or simply be that jubilant at the idea. It was hard to tell with the boisterous Ranger. “A dungeon, a chance to win glory so closely after my ignominious defeat by Tranzig. This is a sign from Tempus!”

“Yes, a second dungeon to clear for the butt-kicking trio of Minsc, Boo and Harry!”

Harry laughed but looked over at Imoen. “You said you didn’t detect that trap. Do you think you could detect similar ones now?”

“It doesn’t work like that, Harry. I mean, I can recognize similar traps most of the time, but only if I’ve seen them in the first place, and I **didn’t** see that one. But I’d certainly be willing to try,” Imoen answered, covering her concerns with the ease of long practice.

But Imoen’s status ailment of being a minor claustrophobe was still there, and Harry let her see his concern for a moment, but she waved it off. “Seriously, I’m fine, Harry. I’m also all we got in terms of detecting traps. I’ll handle it.”

Harry continued to look at her for a moment, then sighed in resignation, acknowledging that point. Then an idea occurred to him, and while the others thought he was staring out into the dark of the tunnel, Harry tried to flip back to the first level of the mine, thinking. He couldn’t quite figure out what kind of mental command would do it for a moment, but after a few seconds, his mental command of Nashkel mines first floor worked. *Yes! And... yes, Imoen’s traps are still there, some of them anyway. I can see them on my map.*

That means they can both act as early warning systems and, in a limited fashion, eyes and ears left behind us. Excellent! They hadn’t done that before in the gnoll fortress. Harry hadn’t been able to see them, only receiving notifications of Imoen putting them down. Now, thanks to his Mapmaker and Greater Observation skill, he could see a lot more than he had. *I wonder if I’ll be able to share the map with my party at some point? Something to think about.*

With that, a plan formed in Harry’s mind. “I think we should retreat to that first intersection. When we’re there, you’ll put down traps. If that is a respawn point, the traps will cut down on the number of kobolds we’ll have to deal with from that angle.”

“Won’t we run into a lot of opposition there now?” Dynaheir objected though it was more of a question than an argument. She had never been in a dungeon before and didn’t quite know how they worked.

“Not as many as you might think. Most of the kobolds there heard the fight already going on here and attacked us in this group. We might run into a dozen or so, but they won’t have put down traps of their own, and we just smashed a patrol too, so there shouldn’t be any surprises, at least not from our rear or flanks.”

As the others nodded, talking to one another in low tones, Harry let himself fall to the back of the group, asking Minsc to take his place as they did didn’t need any scouts in this

portion. They knew where the enemies would be, and they were traveling areas which it already been cleared of traps. Right now, Harry wanted to think without worrying about being at the front. With that, Harry went through the backlog of blocked messages, those messages he had set his Gamer skill to not show during the battle for fear of getting in the way. There, he found six notices of experience gained from kobolds who had died thanks to Imoen's traps.

Each of them read the same, so when Harry read one, the others disappeared.

Imoen's Trap, Flying Dart has slain a kobold.

Your party has gained + 5 experience.

Imoen's trap-building ability has gone up by +.005%.

Hah! Early warning and defense all rolled into one. When we get out of here, I will want Imoen to, what's the phrase, grind out her skill in traps. They are a game-changer, not only tactically but strategically too.

As Harry had suspected, most of the kobolds who had appeared in that respawn point had already attempted to attack them, and after a short fight against the remainder, Imoen was able to put down traps. Several of them, all around the area.

After Imoen was finished, she and Minsc again began to patrol forward. The rest of the group followed as they made their way back to the position they had run into the fear trap. There, they took a small passage south, finding another set of mine rails heading towards where Harry supposed the intersection right before the tiny lake the miners had mentioned could be. In the other direction, it moved eastward in a curve, with a few offshoots.

Moving along this new rail, they sprang three ambushes easily and ran into one patrol, which they slew at range while moving along the outer edge of the mine. Soon after the last ambush, the mine rail went one way as the tunnel split in two. The rail continued south in one tunnel while the other moved more westerly.

Keeping to the mine rail tunnel for now, Imoen led the group to what was obviously another respawn point directly in front of what looked like the entrance to the third level of the mines, which itself was in a wider tunnel than any they had seen yet. But this one was easier than the last to take care of since there were no side passages to worry about. Once Imoen had confirmed she had taken out the one trap right before the respawn point, Harry saw no reason to waste time. He led the group in with Branwen, Khalid and Minsc joining him in a wedge, with the others behind them.

It didn't, alas, unlock a new formation, but that was okay. The tunnel here was wide enough for the Adventurers to stand four abreast, and they crashed into the kobolds with, in Branwen's words, "All the might of Tempus' hammer given fleshly form!" With Imoen guarding their back, they didn't run into any trouble, and Dynaheir's use of Stinking Cloud knocked out the majority of the kobolds was almost unnecessary.

Afterward, Imoen set up several traps once more, but here she got a little clever. “Grease traps and fire traps?” Harry’s eyes widened as he saw what she was doing.

“Yep. I mean, we aren’t going to be around here when these traps go off. So any impact from using fire underground isn’t going to impact us.”

Edwin snorted, then bestowed a smile of approval on Imoen. “My word, but that is a most interesting mind you have there. Grease to stop their movement and fire to light up the grease. It will work most astonishingly well on kobolds, who by their nature are somewhat cowardly at the best of time.”

“Your approval fills me with shame,” Imoen drawled back in a passable impression of Edwin’s own voice, which caused him to chuckle.

They sprang two more ambushes, slaying several more than a dozen more kobolds, before coming upon another guard point. This one was the tiny lake that the miners had mentioned. The fight there was short and brutal as another Fear trap was there. But this time, Boo had spotted it, even if Imoen hadn’t deactivated it, and Branwen passed around numerous Remove Fear buffs.

Branwen has cast Remove Fear.

This is a level 1 priest spell usable by clerics and paladins (those who have performed their vows to a specific deity anyway). The spell maximizes the morale of the target humanoid, negating any panic they may be feeling. It also protects the target from magical fear effects for the duration of the spell.

Staring across the short, wooden walkway that was set along the center of the lake, Harry frowned. “I... don’t like the look of that other entryway. It looks too close to that first respawn point we ran into, and beyond that, the intersection there is way too open. If we go that way, there’s far too many ways the kobolds could get around our front line.”

He then sighed, pointing to a hand that was just visible in the doorway. “To say nothing of that hand and what it implies.”

Slowly nodding as she stared at the same thing, Imoen agreed. “Yeah, and I would wager that the entrée-way over there has the same kind of Fear Trap we ran into here. And more. If I’m visualizing it right, this area is the center of this floor.”

“That would certainly make sense. Even if the miners would need to boil it, having a source of water like this would be important for many things, not just food and drink,” Branwen answered, frowning as she tapped the butt of her hammer.

“Right. Imoen, put our own traps in the center of the span and here at the entrance. We’ll go back and head further south,” Harry decided.

As she did so, Imoen changed to glance into the water and paled visibly, halting her work and backing away. "Harry, you need to see this."

Moving over, Harry and a few others looked down into the brackish water. With stones wrapped around their limbs, the bodies of three guardsmen, identified by the chain mail they were still wearing, lay at the bottom of the tiny pond. "Ah..." Harry acknowledged, uncertain what to say right now, ignoring the notification that he had found three of the four missing guards. Reading it right now would be too damn morbid.

"By Tempus, we will avenge them," Branwen growled.

"Hmm, a most ingenious use of their bodies, if rather grotesque. They kill the guards, thus spreading fear, then dump the bodies here, despoiling the water. And removing those bodies would be quite a task, too, so even if the locals could reclaim the mines after we defeat the Dungeon and it reverts, they will still be there. And it is further proof a semi-intelligent mind is behind this rather than some kobold with delusions of grandeur."

Moving south along the eastern edge of the lake, the group continued to clear out the mines. They tripped four more ambushes and slew another patrol before making their way back up north towards the other end of the lake from the south. And if Harry and the other frontline fighters hacked and butchered the bodies a bit or overused Cleave, no one said anything.

While they were exploring south of the lake, the respawn time once more ticked over, but thanks to the traps Imoen had already dropped and the distance they had put between themselves and the respawn points, the time passed without any issue. Her grease and burning arrow trap wiped out the second respawn point, and the first was badly denuded of strength, leaving only the patrols to deal with. And even those surprise patrols couldn't take the party by surprise now since Harry had them in the Line Formation again, with Minsc and Khalid at the back and Imoen tucked in with them.

They quickly wound back through the area they had already cleared, wiping out the patrols who had also spawned again, slaying the kobolds throughout the floor once more before returning from another angle to the large intersection on the western side of the lake. It was becoming obvious that if you took the kobold's ambushes out of the equation, they were really no threat to a well-led group of Adventurers.

Although there, they found the fourth guard and eight more dead slaves, proof that the kobolds could be deadly against civilians and non-Adventurers. The slaves confused Harry for a moment before he remembered that the depredations in the mine had been going on for a long while before he entered it. These slaves, unlike the guards, who gave him a notification about having found them, must have died long before Harry and his band entered the mine.

With that thought, Harry looked down another passageway they hadn't gone down yet. "This must lead to the area where the miners said they had their gathering area. And I will wager anything anyone would care to put forward that it will contain a Heart Stone."

"Excellent," Edwin said grimly, wiping sweat from his forehead. The constant movement and tension had begun to wear on him and Imoen. The two of them had the least amount of Constitution of the entire group by a wide margin. Astonishingly, despite her all-too-recent recovery from malnutrition and other status ailments, Dynaheir's Constitution was such that she could keep up easily.

Harry looked over at Imoen and Minsc. "Take your time. We'll be on your heels and will move forward quickly, but I want to know what's there before we attack."

As the two of them moved off, Harry turned to Branwen. "How many more Remove Fear spells do you have?"

"I have enough to use on the total party once each before I needs must rest," Branwen answered with a smile. She, unlike the magic users and the Thief, was having the time of her life. Kobolds were intensely squishy and rather amused her, as did bringing justice to them for their murders.

Catching her amused smile, Harry shook his head, deciding not to ask what was funny. "Ignore me, Dynaheir and Edwin. We've got enough Willpower to resist those spells most of the time and don't have a status ailment like Imoen and her mild claustrophobia." That had come out at one point after the battle on the lake path, although Jaheira's suffering from the same thing had not, and Harry wasn't about to mention it now.

Edwin attempted to look superior at that, smirking at the others, while Jaheira and Khalid simply sighed. While it was fact, neither of them liked having their weakness rubbed in their faces like that.

Seeing that, Harry shrugged apologetically, but he didn't take his question back or say anything to lessen the blow. He got the distinct impression that if he tried, Jaheira would probably smack him upside the head. On the other hand, not mentioning her claustrophobia won him a hundred trust points with her. And for once, the AAS didn't stick on a snarky comment.

"Let's eat something," he said aloud. He handed out several healing berries around the group, ignoring the fact this showed once more that he could use his Item Space far better than most Adventurers while thinking about using one of the Gourds of Power but deciding against it. They had two of those remaining after the fight in the Gnoll Fortress, and using them against kobolds was overkill. But everyone was hurting a bit by this point, tiny wounds slowly adding up, and using the remaining healing berries let Jaheira and Branwen husband their healing spells.

Once the others had their own food, Harry bit into some jerky talking quietly with Branwen and Dynaheir while waiting for the two scouts to come back as Edwin meditated and Jaheira and Khalid spoke to one another in Elfish. He was interested in the cultures the two women represented, and he could tell that Dynaheir was interested in him too.

Not as a man, he didn't detect that, and certainly, his Observation skill hadn't seen anything of that sort, but there was something else going on there. In return, her questions were all about Harry's childhood in Candlekeep, his background and what he planned with his life beyond getting justice for Gorion. Dynaheir was pleased to hear it was justice he was seeking, but she seemed to want to hear something more.

Branwen, on the other hand, seemed more interested in something much closer to hand.

"I have heard from Minsc and Imoen both that you have often resorted to using a hammer. Yet I have seen aught of that. Why would a paladin trainee turn his back on the noble hammer?" the priest of Tempus asked.

"I haven't actually turned my back on it, but I am more skilled with the sword, and the sword is more versatile," Harry began.

Branwen interrupted him with a loud scoff that echoed around the tunnel. "BAH! That is that poncy half-elf's influence talking. A hammer can do just as much damage as a blade can in a battle and can be even more dexterous."

Ignoring Khalid's stuttering mutter of 'p, p, poncy!?' Branwen hopped to her feet, grabbing up her hammer and pulling Harry into the center of the area, watching with some amusement the scowl on Dynaheir's face. "Come, let me show you."

When Harry pulled out his hammer, Branwen began to teach him the intricacies of the hammer, with Branwen giving instructions and explanations. "You stand thusly! And thus, you keep your grip tight but your wrist loose. Do not simply overpower each strike. That is foolish. You must keep light on your feet. Do you let the weight of your tower shield dictate things? No! You are more than strong enough to swing a hammer without putting too much effort into it. You must use that strength better!"

Which, to Harry's chagrin, opened up a similar quest to the one he had developed after learning about the sword from Khalid. He had to work on his footwork (again), his shoulder and arm strength, and wrist dexterity, and until he got them to where he could be called proficient, his skill with a hammer would be hampered. But the upshot, Strength +2, was such that Harry couldn't begrudge the loss in current combat ability, and he continued to follow Branwen's instructions.

"You see?" Branwen exulted, watching Harry finish a series of extremely intricate strikes with his hammer. "I will make a hammer wielder of you yet."

“I think I am going to have to step up Harry’s training after we are done with this dungeon,” Khalid stuttered to his wife. “I refuse to let such a promising swordsman choose another weapon.” Jaheira chuckled at that but said nothing, simply watching the two practice while also keeping her ears open for a sign of any further kobolds.

The two of them trained together for about ten minutes before Minsc returned, reporting that Imoen had found a few traps. Once he was no longer concentrating on Branwen and her training, Harry could already see that on his map, watching as she disarmed them.

The group then moved forward, finding themselves going around a curve in the tunnel, where the traps had been. Harry signaled a halt and waited for Imoen and Minsc to go forward into the area ahead of them.

Meanwhile, he looked at the map, ignoring the mock-growl Branwen released as he switched to a sword, watching as the two scouts entered the large circular cavern. Sure enough, he saw a marker there, a silvery scintillating thing which, when he looked at it directly, popped up the information:

Heart Stone #1.

You have found a Heart Stone, which will now appear on your map thanks to a synergy of your Greater Observation and Mapmaker skills. Within the Nashkel Mines, this is the first Heart Stone you have found, thus its designation. The numbers are arbitrary, determined by in which order you find them. Do not read any further importance into this...yet. Perhaps if your Greater Observation and Tactics skills upgrade further, this will change in the future.

Given your Advanced Observation skill, you can tell this Heart Stone point is connected to the respawn point on the first floor and maybe half the patrols on this floor. There are no patrols on the first floor.

Durability: 60/60

You can also tell that this Heart Stone is of lesser quality than what you have seen previously in the Gnoll Fortress. The quality of the respawned enemies will be lesser, and the Heart stone’s durability is less.

Imoen soon reported back, shaking her head. “There are at least twenty kobolds in that area, and I think a few of them might be a little special. One of them is definitely a shaman, but the others, I’m not certain what they are, but they are taller, and their skin is redder than the others. And there are several traps within the cavern, traps I couldn’t get close to, thanks to how much the kobolds are moving around in there.

Harry thought about it for a few moments, then looked over at Jaheira. “How many summon animals spells do you have?”

“Four,” the druid answered promptly understanding his plan. “I will use one if you wish and we can send them forward to spring those traps.”

“Once the battle begins, yeah,” Harry agreed. “First, we’ll hold at the entrance to the area. Dynaheir, use the Stinking Cloud spell again, Edwin, I’d like for you to take out that shaman before he can make a problem of himself.”

“I will do so,” Edwin said with a nod.

“Branwen, if you could hit us all with Remove Fear now?” As Branwen complied, Harry looked up at Minsc. “Minsc, judging by how wide Imoen said that entrance is I want you to join Branwen and me in the front line. Khalid, keep back of the others just in case. I really don’t want us ambushed from behind again, even if we’re pretty certain we’ve wiped out all the patrols again. When the Stinking Cloud begins to dissipate, Jaheira, you can send in your summoned animals.”

With that, everyone readied themselves, and Imoen finished off the bit of jerky she been chewing, wiping her hands on her leather Jerkins, before pulling out her short bow and moving to stand in front of Dynaheir and Jaheira.

You have formed the Formation, **Hammer Time**.

X 4 to melee speed **once** combat begins.

X 2 damage after combat is joined.

Harry looked at the information again, smiling as he noted that the formation was one of the ones he had used against the previous Dungeon to good effect while attacking. Harry was in the center, with Branwen to one side and Minsc to the other. He grinned at the big man, nodding his head. “Ready?”

“Minsc is always ready to release the boot of justice upon villainy!” He said jubilantly, with Boo once more on his shoulder, having left Imoen behind for the moment.

“Indeed, our large companion says it truly. Into the storm of battle, for Tempus!” Branwen shouted, hefting her hammer.

Harry grinned and led the way forward around the curve in the tunnel, moving to take up positions in the opening. The kobolds had already heard Minsc and Branwen’s shouts, and a few of them had begun moving already towards the entrance. As the three adventurers moved forward with the others behind them, the kobolds chattered to one another then charged, the majority of the crowd in the cavern coming towards them.

Harry and Branwen raised their shields while Minsc used his claymore to block the first cut coming his way. Weapons flicked out, slaying the first group of kobolds to reach them, while

arrows flew in both directions. A spell of Magic Missiles also flew out before a Stinking Cloud spell hit the center of the room, spreading quickly and downing many of the attacking kobolds.

This left nine of them to charge forward into close combat with the trio of warriors, and though one or two were able to get in a few licks on Minsc, Harry and the rest were quickly able to put them down. But the Heart Stone began to spawn still more kobolds in groups of four. Many fell unconscious as they appeared, but enough didn't to add more weight to the enemy's charge. Yet given the disparity in size and the fact the kobolds could not get around them, the front of the 'T' held firm.

The only trouble in the battle began when the Stinking Cloud began to dissipate. At the far end of the mob of kobolds, which continued to grow, kobold commandos began to fire at the group. This was the larger, red-skinned kobolds Imoen had seen, but she hadn't recognized them, perhaps because the only previous time they'd dealt with kobolds had been at night, so the color hadn't occurred to her.

Magically imbued fire arrows flew towards the Adventurers, hitting the trio of combatants at the front of the formation.

Minsc took a few arrows to his chest, but his Plate Mail +1 protected him bar a gash across his collarbone from an arrow that sliced through the thin area between plate mail and helmet. Harry grunted under the impact of several arrows hitting his shield, which had interposed itself between him and the commandos. Branwen fell to her knees, one of them having hit her in the thigh, but she was already casting a healing spell on herself, while Jaheira was concentrating on summoning up her animals on the other side of the battle line.

The animals in question, a trio of wild dogs, growled and instantly began attacking the kobolds, knocking into them and, more importantly, triggering the traps within the large circular room. Dozens of darts flew out, impacting the dogs and the kobolds around them while a series of bear traps snapped shut, crippling the kobolds stuck in them by literally removing their legs. This was followed a second later by a Fear trap impacting the center of the room.

But thanks to Branwen's spell work and Harry's planning, it didn't do anything to the attackers. Instead, it greatly impacted the kobolds, a dozen of whom began to run away in every direction bar towards Harry and the others.

The commandos were still trouble, and a moment later, another shaman spawned thanks to the Heart Stone. But Edwin had been on the lookout, and before the new shaman could get a spell off, he joined his predecessor in death thanks to another round of Magic Missiles.

Harry slashed down at a kobold, slicing its head off, then shouted to be heard over the tumult of battle. *For all they are ambush specialists, once they are in a fight these kobolds are awfully noisy.* "Imoen, can you detect any more traps in there?"

“No! Jaheira’s animals tripped them all,” Imoen replied, releasing an arrow at one of the kobolds. The creature went down, but she had to duck away as his fellows shifted their fire to try and arc their arrows over the front line.

“Good. Push forward!” Harry ordered his two companions, who did so instantly. Harry and Branwen knocked the attacking kobolds off of their feet, using shields to batter them forward and forward again while their weapons flicked out. In contrast, Minsc used a Cleave technique and then charged over the body parts of his foes, roaring gleefully as his claymore slew or crippled a kobold with every strike, only occasionally being forced to defend himself thanks to the difference in reach.

“Edwin, Dynaheir, destroy the Heart Stone!” Harry shouted, then ordered, “Front line, be ready to stop. Minsc, you’ll have to get behind Branwen and me when it blows. You don’t have any shield.”

Edwin and Dynaheir began to cast Acid arrow and Magic Missile towards the Heart Stone. It took them four spells each, but as the kobold commandos fire started to cause more wounds among the party, the stone finally started to crack, then shatter. That shattering was as violent as it had been in the gnoll fortress, and the shards slew the majority of the commandos and many of the kobolds who had run forward to engage the attackers, their own bodies acting almost like shields for Harry and his allies.

With the spawning enemies done, the only group still fighting were eight kobolds in front of the party and three enemy kobolds commandos at the far end who had been out of the blast radius. But they seemed to have used up their fire arrows, and Harry charged across the intervening space, cutting down two more kobolds as he did so.

Branwen and Minsc charged with him, while the others spread out, finishing the kobolds off who had been knocked over by their charge or who had fled to the outer edge of the room in an unsuccessful and mad attempt to get away, fueled by the Fear Trap. Finally, the last kobold died, and the area was clear.

Congratulations, you have destroyed a Heart Stone!

The Dungeon respawn rate has changed, becoming 25% slower than previously. The new respawn rate is five hours.

Note: Given this Dungeon's level, when a Heart Stone is destroyed, the respawn zones connected to that Heart Stone that have previously been cleared will automatically respawn. Half the patrol points tied to the remaining Heart Stones will also respawn. Ambush points will not. Any ambush point you clear will remain such for the duration of your stay in the Dungeon.

Further, given the level of this Dungeon, there is no overarching intelligence controlling the kobolds actions, even if one is controlling their objectives and supplying them with tools and material. Thus, no enemy will be aware of events on this floor or any other. You still need to

worry about word of your presence spreading on the floor you are currently exploring, but not beyond that.

Behind that, Harry saw several experience notifications appeared behind that notice from the several dozen kobolds who had just died thanks to Imoen's traps. He winked over at her, and she grinned back at him before Harry turned his attention to the rest of the room. "All those in favor of a real meal break, say aye!"

When the ayes had it unanimously, Harry looked over at Minsc. "Grab up that minecart over there Minsc, let put a few of those in the entranceway just in case. Two-hour break people, eat or rest I don't care which. But Imoen, when we're ready to move on, I will want this room trapped as well. Just in case.

"You know, these traps are going to have to come down after we're done here, right? Or else they'll be just as dangerous to the miners as they are to the kobolds."

Harry shrugged, then actually smirked a little. "Yes, I suspect so. We'll mention that to the Mayor. We'll even offer to get rid of them for a small remuneration."

While Branwen and Dynaheir looked a little annoyed at that, the others laughed, with Edwin chortling the loudest in approval.

While the others were going through a few after-battle checks of equipment, refilling stone pouches and quivers, as well as taking arrows from the cobalt commanders in Khalid's case, Imoen just moved over to the wall and laid out in front of it, pulling out her sleeping roll. Like Harry, she no longer cared about showing anyone their ability to really make use of their Item Space. And even if Harry hadn't been doing that before, Imoen was too knackered right now to care. Within seconds, her eyes were closed, and she was asleep, far faster than she would normally be able to thanks to Harry's Gamer skill affecting his Party Members.

Edwin followed suit, disdaining to offer any aid to the various things occurring all around him, while Branwen joined Minsc and Harry in creating a makeshift barricade. Dynaheir and Jaheira were more interested in the various items around the room, in particular a set of pots set up over small fires along one wall. "Harry, you and Edwin might wish to take a look at this. Your Observation skill could make more out of it than our own," Dynaheir announced.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not wrong, simply strange. This pot is apparently full of what my own Observation skill is telling me is simply 'Mysterious Liquid'."

Harry frowned at that, and Minsc waved him off. "Branwen and I have this, friend Harry. If my Witch believes that liquid is important, it is."

At that, Harry left them by the entrance and moved over to join the two women. As he did, he too looked at the liquid bubbling in the pot. It was green, viscous looking, almost like acid but not quite. And as he looked at it, a new notification appeared in front of him.

Mysterious Liquid.

Despite your Observation skills, this liquid defies your analysis. Yet, it is highly unusual and very strange to look upon. You can also tell that it is important because it is set to one side and in a special clay pot. Perhaps this is something to do with the weakness in the iron?

“Okay, yeah, I’m not getting any more information from it than you all are, which is weird in itself,” Harry murmured. “Dynaheir, Edwin, you two are most likely to know what potions we might be dealing with here. Do you have anything to add?”

Grumbling, Edwin moved over to join them, annoyed his rest was disturbed. As he joined them, Branwen and Minsc finished their work on the barricade and began to remove the bodies, piling them into one corner. They would be burned after the group moved on.

Harry took a moment to look at his map again, noting a few areas that they had yet to explore, as well as the traps that Imoen had left behind them. That was something they would have to be doing almost automatically from now on every time they had to explore the Dungeon, Harry reflected. It wasn’t exactly like letting some spell that could allow them to see other areas of the map, but it was almost as good, and guarding their back was always a good idea. *And frankly, those areas don’t look all that large.*

“This is clay, not pewter as would be normal,” Dynaheir began, tapping the side of the cauldron in front of her as she said aloud what Harry’s Observation skill had already pointed out. “And I did not detect any kind of scent that I am familiar with within this green goo.”

“It looks bizarre like no potion I’ve ever seen before, and I have seen many. Part of being a Red Wizard is to apprentice in laboratories that deal with such. I am uncertain what we see here,” Edwin scowled, unused to being so thwarted.

“So this could be the stuff they’re using to weaken the iron?” Harry questioned.

“Quite possibly, but if so, it certainly was not made by kobolds,” Edwin declared firmly.

“Unfortunately, I must agree with the Red Wizard,” Dynaheir said, shaking her head as yet another impossibility of this odd group forced itself upon her.

Harry moved over to the nearest dead body and pulled out a short sword, which he moved to stick into the green goo.

“While I’m happy that you are using an enemy’s weapon and not your own finger for that, I am still uncertain if that is a wise course of action,” Jaheira warned.

"If you have a better idea, I'll listen, and... My own finger? Seriously?" You say that as if you've seen someone do that before." Harry shook his head incredulously.

"Oh, we have," Khalid said with his normal stuttering laugh from where he was still gathering flame arrows.

Jaheira chuckled a wry twist to her lips. "You only need to see one guard investigator taste something then go 'Yes, this is indeed Slab Wurble,srcurlbe srcup', and fall on his face before you realize that that method of investigation is rather a poor one."

Harry shook his head at that, then held up the blade so that everyone could see what was happening as he pulled it out of the goop, some of the goop balanced on top of the blade. Then they watched as the goop on the blade began to fade, soaking into the sword's metal as if the sword was a sponge rather than metal. "...I am guessing that is not natural at all."

"Poisons, oils, and other things of that nature should be smeared on a blade. Yet even then, they do not simply disappear into it, Jaheira answered tartly, though her tartness was that of concern and shock rather than actual annoyance. "So this is not just a chemical we're dealing with. It is also magical."

"So this is a very unusual compound whatever it's doing to the metal?" Harry questioned even as he moved towards the wall nearby cavern.

"You are understating things tremendously," Dynaheir shook her head with a very concerned look on dusky her face. "Mixing magic with chemical reactions is alchemy, and beyond the point needed to make things go boom, it is very, very rare."

"And how much would something like this cost?"

"Cost to come up with a formula, or cost of buying the ingredients and make it in bulk?" Edwin said professionally. "Those are two very different things. To say nothing of getting them here in such quantity that they can make use of it like this. How much of that liquid is needed to ruin a ton of iron, say? We don't know, but I would estimate that it is extremely potent."

Nodding, Harry indicated he understood Edwin's point and was unsurprised to see a small message popping up, explaining how he now had a clue as to who or what might be behind all this.

Your Main Quest, **Vengeance or Justice** has been updated.

Money and power. You knew your enemy had all of these before given the trouble racking the Sword Coast. However, you now know that they have access to something even more precious: knowledge. Creating an entirely new alchemical creation, a fusion of chemistry and magic, is very difficult, even if you can pay for it in the first place.

Whoever is behind this is very well-connected to even discover someone able to create this kind of potion, let alone convince them to do so and in such vast amounts to be used in this scheme. After all, even diluted, the Kobolds and their allies must have access to several tons of it to affect all the iron being dug out of these mines, let alone the iron being shipped elsewhere in the Sword Coast.

All this points to a powerful noble or merchant. Or perhaps a Pirate Lord? Regardless, whoever it is **must** be tied into the upper echelons of society wherever they are hiding, even though everyone else you've been talking to has said those in such positions would not have anything to gain from a war.

While all that was accurate, it wasn't important, and Harry set it aside. He hefted his sword up and began to attack the wall. He swung the short sword once, twice, and then a third time before the blade broke, shattering like glass almost on the fourth strike. Bits of it pattered off his armor, and one bit actually nicked the side of his helmet, but none found exposed skin. "Well, I believe we have discovered what is wrong with the iron."

Side Quest (Large): **Iron Intake Issue** has been updated. You have discovered a clue!

With the Mysterious Liquid in hand, you know exactly what has been done to the iron to make it so brittle and weak, although the how of it eludes you.

You have partially finished this Quest. You know the how. Now you must put a stop to it. Why do you suddenly think this was the easy part?

Harry smiled, then looked over at Imoen, who had woken up at the sound of his sword shattering and was now reading the message in front of her. "Imoen, you found those glass flasks on the first floor. Let's fill them up with some of this liquid. How many do you have?"

"Five," Imoen yawned, pulling them out and setting them beside her before turning and going back to sleep.

Harry nodded at that, then glanced around his companions. "Edwin, Dynaheir, Khalid and myself. Each of us will take one of those vials filled with this liquid. When you get a chance, you two," he addressed the wizards, "I would like you to experiment with this liquid, just to see if we can figure out what went into it. And Khalid, you can send off a sample to your fellow Harpers. Er, you can get them something like that, right?"

Grumbling about Harry being a little too free with their Harper status even among this company, Jaheira nodded. "We can, although we will not be able to receive any information about it until we reach the Friendly Arm Inn at the latest. We don't have any Harper agents in Nashkel, but we can send the vial south into Amn to the Harpers there with ease."

"Good. And Imoen and I will keep two samples to hand over to the mine boss and Mayor. That should be a major help in making Baldur's Gate and Amn both realize someone else is playing them here."

Jaheira nodded approval at that, and Harry idly noted he had gained another 50 respect with her as well as with Edwin and Dynaheir. "For now, once everyone has eaten whatever they wish, I suggest we all bed down for a nap."

"For how long?" Edwin asked instantly. "I believe that both the Witch and I would benefit from the time to memorize new spells."

"Not that long," Harry said, shaking his head. "We have to deal with respawning too often for that idea. Three hours. That should give us time to get to the next level and start exploring before the next respawn time." *And one of the respawn points on this floor and a few of the patrols are still working.*

Tsking, Edwin nodded and went back to attempting to rest while the others gathered by the barricade, having a small meal and talking quietly as their fellows rested. But after two hours, they were moving on once more, with Imoen in the lead.

OOOOOO

Imoen led the way towards the entrance to the next floor down of the mind, pausing here and there. They'd done a once over throughout the level, wiping out the patrols that had been respawned when they had destroyed the Heart Stone, but the Grease and Fire Arrow Traps had worked very well, wiping out the second respawn point right over the entrance to the next floor. While Harry and the others had then gone through two of the tunnels they hadn't yet explored, Harry sent Minsc and Imoen over to check on that, then put up her traps once more. By that point, the rest of the group rejoined her, and Harry had made certain Imoen was still good to go before asking her to lead the way down to the third floor.

Thinking of Harry, Imoen had to smile. *Looking at him now, there's no way that anyone would think he was only twelve, if that, back in our old world. Back in the time loop, I could still pick out mannerisms, facials expressions, bits of knowledge he didn't have, moments where he'd look lost, which showed his real age. But ever since we hit the road, he's been stepping up big time, not just as a leader but also as a man. Not just his tactical sense but how he makes friends and then watches out for them.*

All that Imoen was very happy to see, as well as the fact that Harry was no longer as self-effacing as he had been when they first met, which was one of the mannerisms she had least liked. Even after who knew how many years he spent in the tutorial, he still had seemed shy, almost withdrawn despite his abilities, even up to when they reached the Friendly Arm Inn, facilitating wildly between independent and confident and shy and withdrawn. Now, though? Now Harry was growing into his own, and it was great. *If only he could become a bit more confident when it came ta girls. Heh, if he could play the game, he'd be deadly.*

Shaking that thought off, Imoen's mind twitched over to the group they had gathered around them. She liked them a lot too. Minsc was a given. That big softy had become a firm friend of theirs almost right off the bat thanks to their willingness to put their lives on the line

to protect or rather to retrieve Dynaheir. *And the fact he's actually kind of my type, big, kinda dense and funny, is nice too.*

Dynaheir is still something of an unknown, but she seems to have good instincts, and her magical powers are nothing to sneeze at. I still don't have as good a handle on her personality, but that will come in time. On the other hand, Jaheira and Khalid have grown on me. Khalid's a nice guy, with a few drinking issues, and though she's really prickly, Jaheira's good people too. Reminds me of a hedgehog, to be honest, all prickles on the outside but soft underneath. Branwen seems to be nice enough too, a female Minsc almost, heh! That gal's thighs are something else!

She frowned then, leaning down to examine something on the floor, before shaking her head and moving on, deeper into the darkness away from the broken torch. *It's getting darker here. Still, I've got that ring of Infravision...*

With that thought, she pulled out the second of two rings Imoen had. The first was the one called 'the Prince's Ring', which was a Protection +1 ring. At first, Imoen had been a bit confused about how something like that, a passive enchantment, would work. But she had seen in several fights since that it did work, making her leather armor and even her skin a bit tougher than they should be. The other was the ring Harry had bought at the Circus. The others, bar the half-elves, all had similar items, which would be a very good thing down here.

As the world turned red around her and Imoen began to see through the dark like it was a somewhat cloudy evening, Imoen (and ooh boy did she love leaving the Nymphadora name behind) allowed her thoughts to shift back to the last member of their party. *The only fly in the ointment is Edwin, but even there, like Harry's mentioned several times, the pros outweigh the cons.*

There was no doubt in Imoen's mind Edwin was a rampaging egotist who only really cared about himself. But even that didn't mean he was irredeemably evil, like the Zhentarim agents they'd met. And who everyone else had to apparently fight without me yesterday, she grumbled to herself, keeping the grumble inside with ease as she looked around, letting her Thief's instincts do their job for a moment. *Still, Edwin's proven his abilities if not his morals and...*

Her thoughts cut off as Boo nuzzled into her ear. "gah, okay, little guy, sorry. Woolgathering isn't good, I get it," Imoen grumbled, pushing the little hamster away from her ear and moving on.

Imoen kept her wits about her now as she and Boo made their way forward, with Minsc following about a yard or so behind them. But despite her renewed concentration on the task at hand, Imoen and Boo could still miss traps occasionally. This happened a moment later as Imoen felt her hand, which had been tapping the wall, meet a wire, and she cursed as it moved under her hand. *Shit! I didn't even see it!*

The next second, a Fear Trap lashed out, impacting her mind. Imoen bit her lip to keep from crying out as she came out of Hide-in-Shadows, turning to bolt down another passageway that had just opened up to one side of her.

But Minsc had been following on her heels and had somehow avoided the trap. He now came out of Hide-in-Shadows, grabbing at Imoen's arm in a gentle grip. "Wait, friend Imoen, the feeling will pass! Do not let the vile whisperings of the cowardly evil drag you down!"

Then arrows began to hit him and Minsc and Imoen from the darkness, as four kobolds hopped forward towards them, short swords extended. Behind them, two more kobolds continued to fire at the Ranger, believing, accurately, that Minsc was much more of a threat than the far shorter human.

Those arrows failed to penetrate Minsc's Chest Plate +1, and they bounced away from Imoen, too, thanks to the Amulet of Protection which had been added to her inventory as well for this caper. But one of them still left a gash on her forearm, adding to her terror, and despite her best attempt to keep silent, Imoen began to break away from Minsc, turning and racing away.

The lack of any other wounds seemed to confuse the kobolds, and they paused in their rush. A second later, three of them went down to a Cleave from Minsc, which cut all three into pieces, sending their entrails and bodies flying throughout the tunnel.

Then he was bellowing and charging towards the archers, taking several more hits from her arrows, which just bounced off his chest plate, although one of them lodged in his shoulder right where the plate mail ended. But kobolds didn't do the proper thing. They didn't run. So when Minsc crashed into them, the battle was over before he even raised his sword.

Down another tunnel, Imoen had barely enough self-awareness left to hear a clicking noise under her foot as she ran, and with a yelp of pure terror, Imoen forced herself into a roll. This landed her at the feet of five more kobolds, who instantly jumped on her. Imoen tried to dodge, but the sword of one of them nicked her side despite the kobolds getting in one another's way more often than not.

The pain of that and the danger she was in helped start to break Imoen out of the fear spell's influence. *Get up, girl, get up and fight! I'm not going to die down here! I'm not going to die in the dark!*

The next second, to her frank astonishment, Boo had leaped off her shoulder and into the face of one of the kobolds who had been about to run her through. The kobold cried out, falling back and reaching up to its face, but Boo's teeth had already found one to its eyes, biting. Then Boo was leaping down to the kobold's shoulder and skittering into its jerkin, heading down. The kobold began to dance in place, thrashing so much the other kobolds backed away, but they still tried to attack Imoen even as their friend's hands flew from its ravaged face down to between his legs, a low keening wail sounding from the kobold, as it dropped to its knees.

As for Imoen, the Amulet of Protection and her ring's addition to her armor once more helped her. Between them and the leather armor the next sword strike further, although it left a long open slice around across one of her boob's, which caused her to yelp in pain and rising anger now that she had finally thrown off the fear effect.

It also reminded Imoen, for the first time in a while, that she had way more resources to bring to the fight than just her Thief skills. "GAH, remember you're a Witch, you daft bitch!" She growled to herself, then thrust out her hands to either side.

A Cutting spell sliced two of the attacking Kobolds around her in half, and Imoen dodged around another sword strike, battering the sword aside with her own, which appeared in her hand from her Item Space. "Ooh, it's almost like magic," she quipped to the somewhat stunned look on the kobold in front of her, getting more of her mental equilibrium back.

A Stupefy spell hit both her remaining attackers, dipping her health into the midrange, but her sword made quick work of them. After slicing the throat of the one Boo had dealt with, Imoen reached down to pick up Boo, who was meticulously cleaning his whiskers. "Thanks, Boo. I think you just earned yourself a cracker. And if Dynaheir gives you grief, you come to me, and I'll bop her on the nose."

Boo chittered at her, and the two of them turned back the way she had come when Minsc barreled into view, his bow in hand, his sword back in his Item Space to let him run easier. "Friend Imoen, have you regained your senses?" he questioned instantly.

"I have, big guy. Sorry about that," Imoen answered with a scowl before slinging her arm around his waist in a quick hug, feeling a little light-headed and even more tired than before, thanks to the Blood Magic spells she'd used. "And thanks again for Boo. He saved my life here."

"Ah, it is good to know that Boo is still proving himself a most amazing giant miniature space hamster. But I see he has been eating both eyeballs and other...ball-like objects. You know that is not good for your diet, Boo. You will never find a proper mate if you become overweight," Minsc reproved, wagging a finger in front of Boo while hugging Imoen back with his other arm. "And what is this 'boom shakalaka' you speak of, and what does it have to do with Imoen and me?"

Chuckling, Imoen moved away from Minsc, pointing back the way they had come. "Come on, let's meet back up with the others. And when we get out of this dungeon, I'm going to lay out in the sun for at least an entire day. Most of which I'll spend wishing more strongly than I've ever done since learning about how much trouble a pony would be that I will never have to enter another dungeon again. At least not like this one."

"Ah, but dungeons or where the vilest evils always hide, ready to pounce on the unwary like a spider in a web!" Minsc boomed before Imoen smacked his shoulder.

“None of that, Minsc! Remember, we’re still in enemy territory here. Now, come on, let’s get back to the others. *And when I get him alone, me and Harry are going to talk about Magical Vows. I think it’s time we stop holding back for fear of secrets getting out. Power is only useful if you can actually, you know, use it, darn it!!*

OOOOOOO

Harry watched as Branwen and Jaheira healed Imoen back to fighting strength. Her explanation of what she had run into, and the wound she had taken to her side and her... pectoral (Harry wasn’t about to call it a boob, Imoen would never let him hear the end of it) had been enough to convince Branwen that she had run into something which it drained her health pretty badly, but already, Harry could see the questions piling up behind Dynaheir’s eyes. The wounds that Imoen had taken did not match up to the amount of health that she had lost.

It was obvious that both magic users were starting to add two and two together. *Branwen might be doing the same, but she doesn’t seem to be as naturally curious as the two magic users are, and she hasn’t been with us as long either. Funny how much those two have in common despite their antipathy.*

For now, Harry set that worry aside to concentrate on the most important thing. “And again, you didn’t see the trap?”

“Not at all. I was going slowly. I was careful, using the Ring of Infravision and listening for Boo’s warnings. There was no sign of a trap, and then, boom, Fear Trap in the face,” Imoen reported, waving her arms like a windmill in annoyance.

“Mighty Boo is also concerned. He says that even his gimlet gaze was unable to spot this trap,” Minsc added.

Scowling, Harry surreptitiously looked at party information on Imoen, looking at how far she had to go before her next level up and the percentage of her Detect/Disarm Traps skill. Unfortunately, she wasn’t close at all.

“Well, crap. We might be forced to use summoned animals and monsters to clear the passages ahead of us,” Harry shook his head. “It won’t be as good since any kobolds in the area will come to see what is going on, and any ambush will react to it too. But it is their traps that make kobolds so...”

“Don’t we have a Grapes of Insight?” Khalid asked in his usual stutter, and everyone turned to him. “It was one of the fruits that the dryad gave us.”

“Will that help?” Harry asked intently.

“It helps with everything that relies on Intelligence and Wisdom, so it should help Imoen to find and disarm traps,” Jaheira answered enthusiastically, smiling over at her husband.

“Good enough,” Harry said with a nod and looked over to Imoen as he pulled out the fruit from his Item Space, uncaring of the looks he got from Branwen, Edwin and Dynaheir. He handed the grapes over to Imoen with orders to use it when they reached the next floor and started exploring.

“Might I also suggest, that we start to use our summoning spells in battle if we need to?” Edwin began, his tone implying that he would be doing that whatever Harry said. “The Witch and I have used many of our direct assault spells that don’t use fire at this point. Destroying the Heart Stone took it out of us both.”

“That makes sense, but try to keep one in reserve both you and Jaheira,” Harry answered. “It’s always good to have an ace in the hole.”

The third floor’s entrance almost instantly branched into three passageways. Imoen had raced down the rightmost passage after tripping a Fear Trap on the central tunnel, but beyond that, two things bothered Harry. For one thing, the only light he could see was a ways down the central tunnel. None of the torches they had seen previously seemed to be here at all.

But Khalid and Jaheira seemed bothered by something else as they looked around, scowling. Harry noticed and asked them what was wrong, to which Jaheira replied, “There is a very annoying sound of dripping water in the background. It isn’t very loud, thankfully, but it is there, like, like an aural itch almost. Most annoying.”

“Makes me glad for my merely human hearing then,” Harry quipped before looking at Imoen. “Since you ran that way, we might as well start to the right this time.”

“Right,” Imoen nodded, leading the way as she chomped into the fruit.

The passageway split off, or rather this passage and the next were connected often by side passages. This made areas of standing stone and dirt, which concerned Harry since it meant that any force of Kobolds could try and circle them from the side or behind easily.

The first group of kobolds they ran into was squatting in the center of an intersection that looked like a ‘Y’ on the map with the bits of at least six long-dead slaves nearby. It was quite large, a force of sixteen kobolds led by a Kobold commando. Unfortunately, the traps that Imoen could see thanks to the Gourd of Insight were right underneath the kobolds. That meant there was no way that they could charge in two hand-to-hand without tripping them, much to Branwen’s annoyance.

But Harry was concerned as he looked at his map and listened to Imoen’s verbal report, Minsc having stopped the instant he spotted the kobolds. “I... I don’t like this. This area isn’t open, but there are too many side passages.”

“Should we retreat then, mayhaps back to the northernmost passage?” Jaheira asked.

“No, I don’t think so. But be ready with one of your Tangling Vines spells just in case. Dynaheir, don’t use your Stinking Cloud spell. We need to conserve those for now,” Harry requested. “The rest of you, take this group from range. Branwen and I will back you up if need be.”

The instant that Harry and the others began to fire at them from range, Harry’s words proved prophetic. The other tunnels, two on their left, with one behind their position, and one on the right behind them, came alive with the sounds of kobolds. Fifteen or twenty – it was hard to tell with the red dots overlapping as they were - of the little creatures attacked, forcing Harry to change their formation on the fly.

Most of them seemed to be coming from the right passage, but Harry didn’t trust that. “Jaheira, Tangling Vines to the left! Imoen and the rest of you concentrate fire on the right, Branwen, Khalid, make a wall there, Minsc cut down any that get through Jaheira’s Tangling Vines! I’ll hold here.”

As the others leaped to obey, Harry was swarmed by the first group of kobolds, but his sword flickered out this way and that, Cleave letting him slice down two of them before he stabbed a third. But then, thanks to the amount of punishment it had taken since they entered the mines, his blade shattered. “Why does that happen only at the worst time!” he snarled, then pulling out another sword from his Item Space, hacking and slashing. Now was not the time to try to switch to his hammer.

The left flank of the attack stalled out thanks to Jaheira, who nodded in approval at seeing Harry’s plan work so well. *The boy was right and proves once more my husband, and I were correct to trust him as much as we do.*

Using her Tangling Vines spell as an area denial weapon had been an excellent idea because it caught the kobolds on that side who had been using Hide-in-Shadows. There proved to be another fourteen on that side, along with the three there previously, split into smaller groups that came at them from both of the tunnels on that side. Thankfully, her spell spread out over enough area to cover both passageways where they intersected this one.

Now, Jaheira’s sling went to work, and a stone flashed out, crashing into the head of one kobold, then another.

Meanwhile, Branwen and Khalid had charged forward while Dynaheir and Edwin had begun their spell work. And disdaining Harry’s earlier words, Edwin expended one of his Summon Monster 1 spells.

Two green goblins appeared amid the kobolds, activating traps there that the party hadn’t yet seen. After that, Harry’s aspect of the fight started to peter out, while the concentration of most of their firepower slaughtered the kobolds on their right flank.

“The only thing the kobolds didn’t do well enough in this ambush was they didn’t bring enough archers,” Harry said afterward, wiping at some of the blood on his face. His helmet had been knocked askew by a kobold who had gotten in under his guard and basically thrust his short sword nearly straight up, catching Harry on the side of the neck and chin slicing his helmet’s chin strap as it went.

“Indeed,” Branwen nodded, similarly cleaning off gore from the head of her hammer. “These little creatures have a true mastery of ambush and traps, but when it comes to the actual combat...”

“Do not disparage them,” Jaheira warned. “Never underestimate your opponent like that. Yes, kobolds are individually weak and somewhat cowardly. But in large groups, especially in a situation like this, they can be extremely dangerous. As Harry said, if they had more archers, especially on the left flank, this battle would have gone against us quickly.”

“That’s what I was getting at,” Harry nodded her way, then looked over at Imoen, who was working on one of the final traps which hadn’t been tripped by Edwin’s summoned monsters. Meanwhile, Minsc had gone down the rightmost trail, heading north. “Any luck?”

“No,” Imoen grumbled, “I, I don’t think I’ll be able to disarm this. And... I can’t even tell what it is, darn it. I think it’s another magic-based spell, but not a Fear Trap. I don’t think we need to mess with this one.”

Frowning, Harry nodded. “Well, at least the miners were good enough to leave us a lot of tunnels for us to take instead.”

“Peons, honestly. There is nothing a Thief can do that magic cannot do better.” With that, Edwin gestured with one hand. An Acid Arrow raced out, striking the center of the area that Imoen had said marked the edges of the trap.

There was a click, and a pushing noise, as two blasts of fire leaped out from either side, causing Imoen to gasp and fall back, rolling along the ground back towards the others.

Edwin’s Acid Arrow has triggered the Trap, **Flame Tongue.**

This mechanical trap is a medium-level snare that hides two large gaskets of gas within the walls, which are then ignited by a spell component you cannot quite understand, thanks to not having enough specific knowledge about alchemical properties and magic.

If hit by this spell, a person will be Immolated. This is a level above the status ailment: Burned and will result in -80 health instantly, with -10 health every second after.

Imoen stared at the flame as it continued to gout out from the sides of the passage, feeling a little light-headed. Judging from the looks the others had, they too were feeling it, and Harry instantly ordered them all to retreat a ways back to the first of the left tunnels, dragging Khalid away as he seemed about to pass out on the spot.

Once there, they began to breathe more easily, and Imoen spoke up, pointing back towards the trap, which she could barely see from here. "Okay, does everyone else agree with me that that trap is way beyond any other trap we've seen so far?"

"I fully agree with that," Jaheira growled. But she wasn't looking at the trap. Instead, she was looking beyond it. "Khalid, does that not look like a helmet of somewhat better repair than most kobold equipment?"

Khalid stared as well, then nodded, his stutter coming out even more than normal as he and Jaheira both seemed to be still struggling to breathe a bit. "It is. I believe we have found the remains of the last group of adventurers."

"Honestly, I'm more surprised that they got this far than anything else," Branwen said bluntly. "We have been traveling calmly and carefully, which most Adventurers that I have met would deem cowardly."

"Bah, you just need to meet better Adventurers then. Of course, the best Adventurers would not be caught dead grubbing down in this hole, nor would we if I had my druthers," Edwin grumbled.

"Uh, guys, that trap's not deactivating. That's so not good." The flames had cut off, but Imoen, still using her Detect traps spell, could tell the trap was still there. This was the first trap they had run into that reset after use, and as Imoen had mentioned, this wasn't a good sign.

Minsc came back down the same passage he had left by, shaking his head. "Mighty Minsc saw the flash of fire and light from ahead of him and heard Harry's order to retreat. That passage leads to the other side of the 'Y' shaped intersection. There is another curving around the underside of the 'Y', but I did not finish exploring down it. At the top of the 'Y' where it intersects the path Minsc was just on, there is a little alcove, but nothing else."

"Okay, Imoen, trap all of these tunnels. Minsc was able to go around this trap. He'll show you the way to the other side of that intersection. It's got to be a respawn point with numbers like that. We'll follow right behind you from now on. We won't have as much time to plan out anything, but it should still let you spring most of the traps and keep us close in case you run into trouble, which Jaheira and Khalid should be able to hear quickly."

"Fine, but Harry, you and I need to talk soon. We need to start thinking about... certain things," Imoen said, giving Harry a pointed look and wiggling her fingers toward herself, Harry and then mouthing the word 'magic'. Harry understood but wanted to put off talk on that score for now. It was something they had to approach carefully and better, in a place that was safe or at least defensible.

With Imoen in the lead like this, the next two fights were close and furious. As Harry had feared, the kobolds were able to surround them both times, shifting back and away from the frontline combatants and trying to come at the center of their group. After the second

battle, Harry decided to mix up their formation. He had Minsc and Branwen switch places with Branwen stationed in the center with the mages and Jaheira, while Khalid held the backline by himself, and Minsc and Harry led the way.

As they moved, the Adventurers noticed numerous small watery pools scattered around without any seeming rhyme or reason. These were the source of the dripping noises which bothered the half-elf couple so much.

When Harry asked the others, only Branwen could tell them why this was. "I've seen much the same thing before. When a mine gets too close to a large body of water, sometimes the water will seep in. Or if the mines are below the waterline, you'll deal with water coming up out of the ground."

However, these pools hid a deadly danger.

The party had just found another Heart Stone set in the easternmost area of the map. This was off the central tunnel, which ran straight through the floor to the entrance to the next, and was not a cavern. Instead, it was another intersection. One passage went east from the main one, intersecting another that ran north to south on a bit of an angle.

And worse, the enemy protecting this Heart Stone were more numerous and simply better than the forces they had faced before, although this wasn't clear at first because of their locations down the two side passages. On top of fifteen regular kobolds and kobold archers, there were eight kobold commandos and three shamans along with several traps that Imoen couldn't reach among them. The traps were also wide enough to cover the whole tunnel, forcing Imoen back.

With Imoen unable to get close enough to see either side of the intersection, the shamans came as a nasty surprise to the party as they charged into battle. One of them cast *Tangling Vines*, catching Harry, Minsc, Branwen and Dynaheir, while the others were able to get away. Khalid and Jaheira danced among the vines, their greater dexterity once more proving its worth.

"Edwin, Dynaheir, Jaheira, deal with the shamans! Imoen, Khalid, try to snipe at those commandos! Don't worry about the front line for now," Harry ordered as he blocked the sword flow from one of the kobolds, then rammed his shield poured into another, lifting the little creature up. To Harry's surprise, it scabbled at the shield, grabbing the top of it with one hand and attempting to thrust its short sword over the top towards Harry. Harry blocked it with his own sword, which took his sword arm out of position, an awkward move that cost him as the vines around him twisted, throwing off his balance.

The next second, a kobold stabbed him in the side with his short sword, while another tried to hack at his leg. "GAH."

Seeing this, Jaheira instantly stopped her attempt to shoot at the shamans, instead of moving to cast a medium Healing Spell on Harry, followed by another one expended on Minsc, who growled in anger as a blow hit his sword hand, cutting it to the bone along the back of the hand and making him drop his blade before Jaheira's spell healed the wound. Even so, his fist smashed that kobold's face into mush, and he roared, grabbing up his sword once more.

The next second, Harry's sword was knocked out of his hand, and another kobold was scrambling, moving forward on all fours to cut at his legs. Having no time, Harry quickly pulled out another longsword from his inventory, stabbing down at that kobold while two more shamans began another spell.

At the same time, the Heart Stone spawned six more kobold warriors, who instantly hopped towards the party. But they were not a danger yet. The Shamans were. A series of buzzing noises caught Harry's attention, and a second later, he saw a new notification.

Your enemy has cast **Stinging Swarm**.

This spell calls into being a large swarm of buzzing, stinging, biting insects. The swarm will strike the caster's target, then spread to anyone else nearby who is in the same party.

Any individual hit with this attack will have to make a save against Fear. Any mages or wizards hit by the spell will be unable to concentrate on casting their own spells.

The swarm struck Edwin and Dynaheir, who began to fall back, slapping at their skin and nearly screaming in panic, but they didn't fall prey to Fear, simply retreating from the fight. Minsc was struck too, and due to his lower level of Willpower, the big Ranger fell into a panic, which instantly pushed him into his Berserker rage. But at the moment, that didn't matter as he, like Harry and Dynaheir, were caught, unable to move thanks to the Tangling Vines.

However, stinging bugs couldn't bother Jaheira. As a druid, she could not be harmed by spells that used animals or bugs in such a manner. The bugs didn't even perceive her as a target.

"Natures call!" Jaheira shouted, and a bolt of lightning threw out from her staff, slamming into one of the shamans, and the Tangling Vines spell holding Harry and Minsc in place faded.

Instantly, Harry grabbed Minsc by the shoulder, ducking underneath a blow from the other man's fist, shouting out, "The enemy! The enemy is there, Minsc! Charge! For your Witch, for butt-kicking!"

At the same time, Boo, who had rejoined Minsc for the battle, bit Minsc's other ear. Harry then pulled the other man along, dodging his wild sword swings until the other man got his feet under him. The two of them charged, battering aside the kobolds in their way, not even bothering to kill them in an attempt to close with the shamans and the kobold commandos. Their arrows now began to streak into the group.

Behind them, Jaheira cried out, an arrow having found her side, the flame of the enchantment flicking out and setting her side on fire. Instantly Branwen turned from following the two men into the battle, kneeling beside the other woman and beginning a healing spell.

Instead, Khalid was there, launching himself forward in their wake, anger on what Harry could see of his face. “GRaah!!!!” He was firing his arrows as fast as he could, barely even having time to aim, but each arrow found a commando.

And then, unfortunately, something new was added to the fight. From either side of the passageway the Adventurers had attacked from, new red dots appeared. Harry took a single glance in that direction, thinking it was just more kobolds coming out of Hide-in-Shadows. Instead, the things coming out of the water were not kobolds but something entirely new to Harry’s experience, and a new bestiary page opened in front of him as he glanced at them.

Gray Oozes

A type of Slime, these Oozes can be found wherever it is dark, dank and cool. Like all such creatures, oozes eat through dissolving anyone caught within their Slime, causing tremendous pain to the victim as they meet a slimy death. They move somewhat more quickly than most of their brethren and are always hungry for prey.

Strengths: They are completely immune to normal weapons, Cold and Nature magic. Crushing or blunt damage is also extremely weak against them. When in water, Grey Oozes possess a rudimentary camouflage ability, the better to surprise their victims. They are not intelligent enough to feel fear, although they can feel pain.

Weaknesses: Grey Oozes are not immune to fire damage and are weak to magically imbued cutting blades. Light-based spells may also damage them.

Attitude towards Adventurers: Oozes do not possess enough intelligence or cunning to tell Adventurers from anything else that moves and is red-blooded. Alas, this just means they will eat an Adventurer just as easily as they would an animal.

Harry was then within reach of a shaman, who frantically scrambled for another spell, but Harry cut at his arm, lopping it off. His backstroke took the kobold in the throat, and then he was turning, staring at the new pair of enemies as they moved to attack the somewhat panicky magic users and Jaheira.

The magic users instantly retreated out of sight, while Branwen canceled her healing spell, shouting out, “By Tempus, you will not have them!” She began to hammer at the nearest Slime with her hammer.

This did nothing, and Harry roared out instructions, out of position to do anything, trying to slice his way back the way he had come through still more kobolds the Heart Stone had just summoned. Luckily any kobolds were just as little danger in close combat as they always were.

“Branwen, they’re immune to normal damage! It’s Magic or nothing, and not Nature or Cold Magic either.”

Meanwhile, Minsc was still hacking and slashing at the enemies in front of him, his longsword slicing kobolds in half. Khalid had abandoned his bow and closed with the commandos. Imoen had dealt with the last of the shaman so far and was now retreating out of sight down the passage heading north. Behind her a force of kobolds, including a few commandos and a shaman raced after her, abandoning the main fight.

This left the Heart Stone still spawning enemies, the wizards gone, Jaheira down, and Branwen facing the Gray Oozes.

The only one in a position to do anything about the Heart Stone was Harry, and with a glance Branwen’s way, he moved in that direction.

“Then Tempus has given me a weapon that can smite these enemies still!” Branwen shouted as Harry did so, and she then called upon her god’s name once more, shouting out, “Give me strength that I might smite this foe!”

With that, Branwen dropped her war hammer, and the same scintillating magical hammer appeared as she had used in the ambush back on the second floor. With it, Branwen wailed on the Slime in front of her, which recoiled in pain. The other two paused, before moving in her direction instead of attacking the vulnerable Jaheira.

That was good enough for Harry, and he reached the Heart Stone at that point. Placing his hand on it, he growled out, “Bombarda, watching as the Durability dropped from sixty to ten. Then he was dancing around it, stabbing his way through two more summoned kobolds. This let him race back to Branwen and the Gray Oozes, who had begun to attack her from both sides, and had even caught one of her feet by the time he had damaged the Heart Stone.

Aiming for that one, Harry pulled out his magical longsword, and activated the special attack he had gotten from Minsc. “CLEAVE!”

The attack chopped into the Slime, hacking off a portion of its central mass. The Slime didn’t like that. It reared up, trying to swallow sword and Harry both. Simultaneously the rest of its mass flattened out, shifting along the ground towards him, while the rest rose to grapple with his sword, but Harry was too quick and backed away.

At that point, the two wizards finally returned, the Stinging Swarm spell having run its course. Seeing them, Harry shouted, “I damaged the Heart Stone, but had to fall back to help Branwen. Finish it off.”

The two wizards did so with alacrity, Dynaheir looking shamefaced and Edwin extremely angry. Magic Missiles flew, and soon, the Heart Stone exploded, the message of its destruction appeared but thankfully was small and out of the way of Harry’s sight for now. A shard of the

stone caught Minsc in the back, but didn't do much damage to him, although it did quite a bit to the Kobolds around it.

Meanwhile, Harry stabbed again and again at the Gray Ooze, doing some damage but not enough to finish it off, until the cooldown time on his Cleave ability ended. This time the attack cleaved the slime in two, and it seemed to collapse. Half of it shifted into the water, running down back into the pool, while the rest tried to reform. But Harry's wasn't having any of that. He started stabbing once more, and soon he saw the message:

You have killed a Gray Ooze. +275 experience.

By the time he was done with his opponent, Branwen had finished her own off and was kneeling next to Jaheira, looking up at Harry. "I need you to remove the arrow while I am finishing the spell. I'd also like another pair of hands to help me staunch the blood flow of blood to her thigh." Jaheira had taken another arrow to her thigh after Harry had been forced to concentrate on slaying shamans.

Instantly Khalid was there, kneeling down next to her, as Harry took up position on the other side. Around them, the battle continued but turned against the remaining kobolds, who had mostly been on the southern flank of the battle. Edwin used a Magic Missile spell while Dynaheir using her last Stinking Cloud spell. With the Shamans gone and no more spawning, the battle didn't need him right now, letting Harry concentrate on helping Jaheira. "Tell us what you need to do."

Two healing spells later, Jaheira was well enough to start healing herself, using her last medium healing spell to do it and then reaching out to and laying a hand on his shoulder while nodding at Harry and her husband. "My thanks," she said to them both, and Harry noted that he had won 500 more respect and trust points, although Harry had to bite his tongue not to comment on the messages postscript.

I guess saving her life is enough for even Jaheira to acknowledge.

All right, the snarky tone needs to stop. Jaheira's mellowing, I can feel it. Harry thought to himself with a chuckle, moving over to check on Edwin and Dynaheir.

Edwin huffed and waved them off, while Dynaheir smiled wanly and thanked him for the concern. Both were covered in insect bites, which seemed to cause Edwin to shake slightly from the urge to scratch, but the spell didn't actually damage. In contrast, Imoen had raced through the crowd of kobolds, leading some of them down one of the side passages. In other words, out of sight of the rest of the party.

She was scorched, and her leather jerkin looked as if it had been set on fire in one area. Beyond that, the fact her health was in the red and that she moved as if she was both exhausted and drunk told Harry about what she had been up to.

Racing over, Harry reached her, nearly lifting Imoen up as he dragged her toward Branwen and Jaheira. "What happened?"

"Ugh, when I was planning to use our Blood Magic, I ran into another fire-based trap. Dodged the trap, mostly, but the fire caused so much smoke and used up so much air I needed to use a Bubblehead Charm to protect myself from it, and then had to quickly use a Stupefy to knock the kobolds out. I only had hoped to use one spell, darn it. My health was already low," Imoen whispered, leaning against Harry's side.

Harry scowled, shaking his head. "From now on, you are not putting any points into anything but Constitution and Durability. Hopefully, the two of them will help to give you some more health points."

"And tonight, Harry, we are going to be talking about our Blood Magic, understood? I realize we don't want our secrets to get out, but we need to start using our magic more." She growled. "In particular, if we run into any more moments like I just did, you need to know the Bubblehead Charm."

Sighing, Harry nodded then, as Jaheira finished using one of her last healing spells on Imoen, gestured to the others to gather around, including Minsc, who was looking slightly shamefaced at the moment thanks to having lost himself to his Berserker nature once more. "All right. I think we've come to decision time here. You four, how many spells do you have left?"

"I have my turn undead Aura-based spells, three Minor Healing Spells, and I have one more Lay On Hands for emergencies," Branwen began only to be interrupted.

"Then why are you not using it on us, woman?" Edwin growled, twitching this way and that to stop himself from scratching. "It is not becoming of one such as I to be brought to such a state by such as stinging bugs!"

"Really giving her a reason to help, Edwin," Harry muttered, shaking his head.

But Branwen had ignored the wizard. Instead, he looked over at Dynaheir, indicating she should go next. "One Stinking Cloud, several Burning Hands, and one remaining Magic Missile spell, along with three flame arrow spells."

Edwin snorted. "I am much the same, although I have one Acid Arrow spell left and three Magic Missile spells along with Three Fireballs."

"Right... Jaheira?"

"I have two Summoning Animals spells, one Nature's Call left, and the charges on my staff," Jaheira said crisply, shaking her head, even as she used one of the spells woven into her staff to heal Minsc a bit. The Minor Healing Spell seemed to work since Minsc's hand fell from his side, where he had been holding a broken rib. "That includes a single healing spell, now."

“Alright.” Harry frowned, looking around as he pulled out a bag of jerky and handed it around. When everyone, even Dynaheir, who normally disdained the trail rations, Harry went on. “This isn’t a decision I am willing to make for us on my own. We effectively have two more minor healing spells and no more Resist Fear spells. And we are all a little battered around the edges.”

Even with healing spells, the only one near full health was Khalid. The others were battered down to barely half in most cases, and even with Jaheira expanding a healing spell on her, Imoen had pushed her use of Blood Magic spells in this last fight.

“But we just smashed another Heart Stone, and Imoen’s traps have done their normal good job of cleaning up the respawn point that was tied to it. That means there’s only one Heart Stone left on this level and another on the next. So, should we fall back and take a full night’s rest somewhere? The place where we found the first Heart Stone looked defensible, or maybe up one of these tunnels here. ”

He waited for a beat, then went on. “But we would probably have to fight our way through at least one respawn point, and the fact that our destruction of this one will have reset all the ones it was connected to. I would prefer to find the last Heart Stone and find someplace else. But I’m not going to make that decision without your input.”

“I think that depends on how many more of those Grey Oozes we’ll run into,” Khalid began before Harry shook his head.

“No, it doesn’t. The Oozes were not immune to magical damage, which means Flame Arrows like those from the kobold commando corpses would be good against them. The problem isn’t numbers. It’s that they could be hiding in any body of water, and we wouldn’t see them until they popped out. I know I didn’t see them before they attacked. And we’ve seen around nine or ten small puddles and other water bits.”

The debate began at that point, with Branwen, Minsc and Jaheira wanting to go forward. Khalid wanted to rest, as did the two magic users, obviously. Imoen wanted to go on, but even after Jaheira used one of her staff’s final Healing Spells, she was still looking too shaky for Harry to give that much credence.

Eventually, it was agreed to fall back and find a place to rest. Looking at the map at that point, Harry found a place that looked inviting. “Okay, so here’s what we’re going to do. We can pull back to near that flame tongue trap, then go around it. Most of the kobolds there have already been dealt with, and the opposite side looks safe. A small alcove there, with two passages that Imoen’s already trapped, and another that looks to be a dead end.”

With Harry and Branwen again in the lead and the two scouts tucked in with the rest of the group, they began to move back the way they had come. As they marched, Imoen moved up behind Harry, whispering, “And what about our Blood Magic spells, huh?”

“You don’t get to use them anymore,” Harry growled, turning and poking her in the stomach before modifying his tone. “And I will start to use them if I have to. Meanwhile, start thinking about how those Magical Oaths you mentioned back at the inn will work. We’ll talk to them tomorrow morning after a good night’s sleep.”

Realizing that they didn’t know what the impact of creating a Magical Oath would be, Imoen agreed to that. If they waited for the morning, Branwen and Jaheira would be available to heal them.

Fortunately, the next two fights were easy enough. The respawned patrols were no match for the Adventurers even now, with Imoen and Edwin beginning to suffer from the exhaustion status ailment. This impacted their physical strength and dexterity, dropping those stats to half what they were normally.

Soon enough, the band of Adventurers were in the small alcove that Minsc had first discovered. Once there, Minsc, Khalid and Branwen began to put up small barricades to either side along the nearest passages there. Imoen also put down still more traps leading to the center of the ‘Y’ where the Flame Tongue Snare was. Dynaheir and Edwin rested on different sides of the alcove, with Jaheira acting as a mobile and vociferous peacekeeping force. And Harry cooked.

Soon enough, the smells of the food wafted around the area, and Edwin shook his head again. “Ah, me, another Harry-made meal. If this Paladin nonsense of yours doesn’t go the way you wish, you could make a much better life for yourself in the cooking industry. Even in Thay, you would make a pleasant enough living.”

Harry snorted as he set out steamed mushrooms. Minsc had been picking them up as they went along, and he had said they were edible. Harry now tried one and nodded, finding it good. “I’ll take the compliment in exactly the way it was meant, Edwin, so thank you and fuck you at the same time.”

That caused Edwin to chuckle, and Harry looked over to Jaheira, noting she was reworking some of the beads in her hair, leaning against her bedroll and seeming at her ease, humming a low tune to herself. He looked the other way and saw Branwen nearly finished making two small walls in the center of the southern-most passage. “Branwen, Jaheira, any requests for the main course? Given how often you and Branwen’s healing spells kept us going, I think giving you the choice is the least I can do.”

“Steak!” Bellowed Branwen from nearby. “Although I confess to some wonder that a young Adventurer has such cooking skill to impress the haughty Thayan.”

While Edwin retorted to that, Jaheira rolled her eyes, addressing Harry’s original question. “I would prefer chicken or pasta, but I doubt we have any of that, so steak will have to do.”

Nodding, Harry pulled a haunch of venison he had bought in town out of his Item Space, laying it on a few plates he had already set out. Then he began to get to work, creating chunk-sized steak bites with a hearty sauce and steamed mushrooms. There was even bread to go with it. "We do have some pasta, but steak and pasta is not a connection I've attempted before," Harry admitted to Jaheira.

After her first bite of the steak, which Harry had somehow known to leave medium rare for her, Jaheira had to concede that this was more than fine. Branwen's over-the-top exclamations of the same thing nearly made them all flinch, staring out into the dark beyond the cooking fire for a moment. When it became clear none of the kobolds were close enough to react, they all turned back to their meal.

Talk during the meal turned to the dungeon and what they might yet find as they moved forward. This went on for some time, then turned to the spells the two Magic users had. Branwen and Jaheira's spellbooks were still good to go, but going forward, Harry hoped to convince the two wizards to change some of their fire spells. But both balked at the idea. Fire spells were good to cause damage and intimidate enemies like kobolds, and if they got to a point where they could use them, both wanted access to those spells.

"Enough," Harry sighed, admitting defeat. "Do it your own way, it's been good enough so far. But now, everyone needs to get some sleep. We've still got a Dungeon Boss and two Heart Stones to destroy. Minsc and I will switch off watch times tonight to give you all as much benefit as possible."

"Indeed, leave it to us! No evil will pass while Minsc and Boo are here to espy it out of the vile darkness!" Minsc exclaimed.

Thanks to the amount of death they had already visited upon the kobolds on this level and the fact none who had seen them had survived, the night passed uneventfully, though once more, Harry received a notification that the group hadn't gotten as much out of sleeping as they should have. That was okay though, since the magic users had gotten enough to renew their memorized spells.

The next morning, while Harry prepared a quick breakfast, Imoen decided to bring up their various party tricks once more. "Hey Harry, if we want to talk about a certain blood-business, I think now's the time."

Frowning, Harry spent a minute rubbing at his lightning bolt scar while the side conversations all fell silent, and then he nodded slowly. "I agree." He then looked directly at Edwin, who cocked an eyebrow at him, a smirk on his face as if he knew what was coming. *Which the ass probably does*, Harry reflected. *Just not all of it.*

Then he flicked his gaze to Dynaheir, who also was watching him with interest. *I don't know what her interest in me is, but I think above and beyond any Vow we make her take, we can put faith in that interest.*

His gaze went to Branwen. But she didn't seem aware of anything but was simply waiting for his orders, resting her hands on her hammer, the head of it placed on the ground.

"Imoen and I have secrets. Secrets which we have kept that would have made our battles up to this point easier," Harry began bluntly. "We are extremely concerned about our enemies, whoever they are, learning of these secrets, and even more in a way we are worried about the attention they might garner us from other quarters. But before we share this information, we will have your oaths."

Edwin guffawed, shaking his head with a laugh. "Did you honestly believe that any Oath you make me take will be binding? I thought you knew my personality well enough by now. I care not for anyone as much as myself. You are a droll fellow Harry, and oddly enough, there have been times when I have almost enjoyed your company. Still, if it comes to a choice between selling your secrets for my own life, I will do so in an instant, and that is not to say I would not make use of them anyway."

Minsc growled, hefting up his sword. And Dynaheir turned to Edwin with a sneer as Minsc raised his claymore. "Then perhaps, we should cut our losses here and now."

"Ah, a pun, or a play on words. The recourse of the truly sick minds among you," Edwin drawled. "But I have gotten to know Harry's personality over the time we have traveled together, and he is a true paladin, god or no. Perhaps you, Witch, would have the pragmatic wherewithal to order my execution. Harry would not."

"No, but if you do not give me your Oath, then you will not have your curiosity assuaged. Of all three of you, you've been with us the longest. You know there's something unusual about Imoen and me. Only by taking the Oath will you find out what that is." For a given value, anyway. The biggest secret, where Harry and Imoen came from, would remain solely their own.

"That is true," Edwin conceded with a wry snort. "But, again, I believe that my self-preservation to be more important."

"And you are making the mistake that I am simply going to ask you to swear on some God or other, rather than on your own magic," Harry went on with a smirk of his own before he turned to Imoen and said. "You're the one that figured this out."

Edwin glanced at Imoen, who smirked impishly. "In Candlekeep, I found a series of old tomes that mentioned magical vows. That's what we're going to do now. Essentially, you will vow to keep our secrets and vice versa in pain of your own Magic turning on you. Done right, your own Magic will keep you from accidentally revealing it, and if you attempt to reveal our secrets purposefully, your Magic will turn on you, burning you from the inside out before you can do so."

"But you will inform us of your secrets afterward?" Dynaheir asked, frowning.

“Yes,” Harry nodded heavily. “And, we will more openly use those secrets in front of you going forward.”

“What if one does not use Magic? I am a priest. My powers come from Tempus,” Branwen questioned.

“In your case, I’m presuming that you can promise on your God’s name and have it bind you.” Harry cocked one eyebrow at her. “Besides, I don’t think you’re the type to give your word and not mean to keep it.”

“True, on both counts!” Branwen laughed quietly for her but still carrying a bit, again they all tensed before breathing sighs of relief as it didn’t seem to have carried. “It is not often done outside of the Oath’s we take when we join the priesthood. But yes, I can vow on Tempus’ name. However, the results will not be nearly as drastic as you say this magical Oath would be for Edwin and Dynaheir. Tempus will strike me down if I try to break it, but I am uncertain if it would stop the breaking in the first place, and I do not think it will stop me from doing so accidentally.”

Harry frowned at that, thinking hard and cursing. “We should’ve thought of that. Still, even mentioning all this means we’ve come too far to back off now.” He looked over to Dynaheir. “Do you want to go first?”

The Rashemani Witch nodded firmly, holding out her hand. “Cast your spell Imoen, and I will keep your secrets. I would do so even without the vow, but better safe than sorry.”

You have gained +200 Respect, plus 100 Trust with Dynaheir. While she is still wary of your association with the Red Wizard, your forthright manner, as well as your caution, has won Dynaheir’s trust. While it might be for her own reasons, she seems to approve of your wish to keep your Blood Magic and other abilities as much a secret as possible. Perhaps eventually, she might even tell you why that is.

Minsc’s relieved exhale sounded loudly as Harry finished reading that message. “Your Witch is as honest as I would’ve expected, Minsc,” he laughed, nudging the larger man in the chest. “I’m glad we’re taking this step so quickly.”

Minsc chuckled too, as Boo, once more on his shoulder, chattered happily. “Yes! For my journey, for my Witch’s Vision Quest and for the good of all, Harry and Minsc and Imoen and Dynaheir, together will be doing much butt-kicking for goodness!”

Rolling her eyes, Dynaheir remained holding out her hand to Imoen. “Yes, yes, Minsc, please be quiet now and let Imoen work.”

“We’ll go over the wording of the oath first,” Imoen cautioned, although that didn’t stop her from reaching out, clasping the other woman’s arm firmly in thanks.

That didn't take as long as she had feared, though, and within minutes, Harry moved forward at that point, touching both of their shoulders.

The two of them had talked quietly about how to do this without a wand and had decided that the words and intent behind them would hopefully be enough to draw out their Blood Magic, which would cause a reaction in the other mage's Magic. If it did, Imoen reflected that it could be big. If the Magic they were all using was the same, it would imply that she could at the very least use magical scrolls, if not outright, use the magic of this universe without the need to dual-class.

"Ergo Fides," Imoen whispered, bringing to mind the memory of seeing her mother perform a magical vow as part of some court thing she hadn't understood at the time. And as everyone watched in shock, tendrils of Magic, swirls of white light, appeared around and Imoen and Dynaheir's arms where they were joined, binding the two together.

"I, Dynaheir, do so swear to keep the secrets of Imoen and Harry of Candlekeep. To never willingly or unwillingly share their secrets and will never speak of them except with those who also know those secrets," Dynaheir said firmly. "So I swear on my magic, so mote it be."

Edwin's eyes narrowed as he watched, scratching at his beard thoughtfully, and he then looked over at Harry, as her pulse "I, Imoen, do witness this oath." Finally, it was done, and Imoen gasped, swaying backward. As she did, Harry saw a message appear in front of him, this one in gold and orange, marking its importance.

Imoen has taken part in a Blood Ritual, a magically infused Oath!!

In this world, giving your word and swearing oaths of this nature are important! Oaths are rarely given, and the Gods of Light take them very seriously.

In doing this Ritual, Imoen has taken it to an entirely different level, binding the Magic of the Rashemani Witch called Dynaheir to this secret. You and Imoen better know what you're doing, or else the consequences for Dynaheir and for Imoen might be very grim.

As it is, the cost to Imoen has already been grim. As the binder, Imoen has lost half of her available health points.

As Harry was reading this, Imoen had nearly collapsed to her knees, shaking her head woozily. Jaheira instantly moved to her side and began a healing spell. Two Minor Healing Spells later, Imoen was back to fighting fit but still looked shaken. "I am not doing that again!"

"You're right. I'll do it," Harry replied instantly. "I have a larger health pool than you and can take that hit when we bind Edwin."

"Ah, and now we come to it," Edwin drawled. "Binding. Binding me to your secrets, with an entirely new magical spell, one I've never even heard of with no recompense to me beyond having my curiosity assuaged? I think not."

“Even if you might be able to figure out how to use our secrets yourself?” Harry asked archly, and Edwin paused, losing some of his steam.

“You haven’t told me enough of your secrets to make me believe that is even possible,” Edwin answered, but it was a thin thing, and Harry simply shook his head. Edwin had seen enough to know that perhaps he could indeed learn something from Harry and Imoen’s abilities.

“And this binding is not an onerous one. It is simply binding you to keep something secret. And someone like you is all too used to keeping secrets, aren’t you? And you owe me.” Edwin’s eyes narrowed, and Harry smirked at him. “I helped you find out what you wanted from Dynaheir where you wouldn’t have been able to with our help. And when you died to get to her, I paid for your resurrection.”

Scowling, Edwin had to concede those points. He looked over at Dynaheir, one eyebrow raised. “Well, woman, what is the effect on your end?”

“I...” Dynaheir shook her head to clear it. While not in pain as Imoen had been, she had been mentally shaken by the Oath too. “I don’t know. I have not yet been informed of their secrets, nor have I attempted to tell anyone else. I felt something shift within me I think, like a wall or room within my mind bound by bands of power as the vow took hold. But other than that, I am uncertain.”

Edwin scoffed, and yet, his eyes were still lighting up with extreme interest. Oh yes, knowledge was certainly power, and perforce, having access to knowledge of what these to do, and perhaps replicating it as this seemed to indicate was possible? Oh yes, that was indeed worth it, as Harry had said. Whether or not he would remain with the group after this adventure was another question. *But I will willingly allow myself to be part of this experiment for that.* “Very well. Let us get this Oath over with, and then let us hear this great secret.”

The second magical vow went as well as the first had, with Edwin quickly finding the same small ‘room’ in his mind, which had somehow been installed into Dynaheir’s mind.

Since she didn’t use Magic, Branwen requested that she wait until she was told the specific secrets. This went about as well as could be expected.

While Edwin stroked his goatee thoughtfully, Branwen leaped to her feet, staring at Harry and Imoen even pulling back from where she had been healing Harry as he began to talk about the reasons behind their odd abilities. “You are children of Bhaal!? How... how in the name of Tempus... that is....”

“Sired by Bhaal, not children of the fucker,” Harry answered tartly while noting Dynaheir didn’t seem all that surprised. “Bhaal might be my sire, but he is **NOT** my father. The same goes for Imoen.”

That put Branwen on the backfoot, and she slowly nodded. "I, I understand. It was just surprising. And I have to admit to some interest as to how it will impact you're becoming a true Paladin."

"I'm trying not to think about it frankly. Not until I find a god I wish to follow. Helm did not seem right for me." Harry's tone was dust-dry, and Branwen laughed.

"Hahaha, I can see why that might be. Helm is a rather humorless, black and white sort of deity," she chortled. "Such has its place, but I cannot see you worshipping such. Still, what does this mean in terms of your riddles?"

"Indeed, while your heritage is fascinating, it is not enough for all this mystery. The Sons and Daughters of Bhaal are known to have powers, it is true. But you have long implied that both of you have much the same powers. Beyond a basic physical power-up, that would be beyond what is currently known of the more special powers those whose blood runs with Bhaal's power possesses," Edwin murmured, his eyes narrowed. *And it is not something I could learn or take advantage of over much blast it!*

Harry had let Jaheira and Branwen both use their last healing spells on him, so he was around 2/3rds of his total health. Now with a shrug, he gestured to one side and the next second, Imoen's favorite spell, Lacero, appeared in his hand. "Well, for a start, how about coming up with our own school of magic?"

Edwin and Dynaheir both leaned forward in interest, and Harry turned over the discussion on that score to Imoen. That discussion went on for some time before blossoming out into including the Advance Adventurer System Harry had access to. The idea of Harry being able to allocate stat points and see them in the first place among his party members was incredible, to say nothing of the Map, Item Space and other things, which explained away a lot of the oddities the trio who hadn't known about it before had noticed.

Here, the conversation got side-tracked for a moment. "Indeed, we party members can at times see similar notifications, although not as much as our leader can. But more importantly, we all saw one when I offered Boo to aid Imoen! Harry's powers, it recognized Boo's might!"

"...What?" Dynaheir asked, staring at her guardian blankly. "That's..."

"It's true!" Imoen interjected, while Khalid and Harry just nodded. "We all saw the system acknowledge Boo as a giant miniature space hamster, and he has **really** been helping me with the traps. There's no way we would have gotten past so many without issue without Boo helping me."

"But, but that, that is..." For once, Dynaheir looked lost for words while Jaheira simply rubbed at her face, muttering about the randomness that is life.

“Actually, the way he helps Minsc is even better. He gives Minsc fifteen points to Willpower, and near-immunity to mind magics,” Harry added, smirking somewhat at the shock this revelation had evoked.

“Interesting. I wonder what sort of knowledge could be gleaned from a in-depth examination of that little creature,” Edwin mused. He stopped speaking as Harry and the others, bar a still shocked Dynaheir stared at him. “It was a joke! Mostly. But at any rate, you hadn’t told us yet what we need to do to partake of this aspect of your powers, since it is obvious we have not yet done so.”

There was more than a bit of consternation on the need to acknowledge Harry as a friend before joining his official party, and what that meant. Edwin was furious at it, but also the quickest to get over the idea of someone being able to specifically see the amount of trust and respect Edwin had for them when he learned how high a bar both were before he would truly ‘befriend’ Harry. Branwen and Dynaheir were harder to convince, but Jaheira helped there, pointing out that the points were awarded or taken away by Harry’s actions and he had never acted in a way so as to appeal to or otherwise manipulate anyone.

When Branwen admitted this, Harry decided it was time for her to give her own Oath. “I trust now that you know that you too will give your word to keep Harry and Imoen’s secrets, Branwen? You need only look at the expression of greed still present on Edwin’s face to realize that rumors of their power alone would bring us all far too much attention.”

While Edwin scoffed and attempted to control his face a bit more, Branwen nodded and intoned a vow to Tempus. “I vow to keep the secrets I have heard this day from Imoen and Harry of Candlekeep on the word of Tempus!”

Attention: your Traveling Companions has vowed to keep your status as a Bhaalson and Blood Magic-user a secret on the name of her god.

As stated numerous times before, Oaths like this are serious business in the land of Faerun. Branwen will literally die before sharing your secrets now.

This is a sign of her trust in you, which has gone up by +400.

“Do not think that this is the last time we will be speaking about these Blood Magic spells we will be having,” Edwin warned. “I will admit that your Oath was well chosen now. Indeed, I can think of forty high-level Red Wizards who would not hesitate to capture you to experiment on you, to say nothing of keeping your abilities from reaching the ears of your actual enemies. But that does not mean I will not attempt to grasp such magic for myself.”

“HA!” Imoen laughed, moving over to her bedroll, stowing it in her Item Space. “It goes both ways, you know. I want to see if I can figure out how to use your type of spells just as much as you want to use mine.”

Edwin paused at that as if the idea hadn't occurred to him, but Dynaheir merely nodded. "Agreed. We must discuss this further, hopefully in a place where we can perform some experiments without being seen or in danger. But for now, it is good that going forward, you will both be using your powers openly."

"Yeah, but remember the caveat. Our spells come straight from our blood, not mana," Harry reminded them all. "Now come on, we can't just sit here and talk about Imoen and my abilities all day."

The group made their way once more around the area containing the Flame Tongue snare, and then began once more to scout out the floor, heading south down the main passageway. Almost halfway down it, the tunnel's nature seemed to change, the supports disappearing, the tunnel becoming rounded at the edges, the walls seeming to have been dug by an animal.

Looking around them, Branwen instantly stated that the tunnels they were now moving through were natural instead of delved. "This might be how the kobolds entered the mines."

"Agreed." Remembering one of the goals they had been given to clear the dungeon had been to find any other entrances to the mine, Harry scratched at his lightning bolt scar, then said slowly, "Imoen, put down a few traps along this length. Minsc, guard her while she does. Branwen, knowing what to look for now, would you be able to tell if any of the tunnels we've passed were kobold make?"

When she nodded, Harry decided. "Okay. Then while Imoen is busy here, we'll retrace our steps. If we assume they have to have come in from the same general direction if not the same point, two other tunnels went south enough that they might be other ways the kobolds could enter the mine."

"And if so, what of it?" Edwin scoffed.

"If so, we knock down the supports in those tunnels on this side of that entrance. It's a start. And maybe on our way back up, we trap them to the nth degree too." While the slang seemed to throw them off for a moment, everyone, even Edwin, agreed with that idea.

Between them, Harry and Branwen were able to smash down enough of the supporting beams to cause minor cave-ins, although that in itself wasn't fun. They had to run away the instant the dust started falling. Even so, they nearly were crushed several times. But when they finished, Harry received a notification.

Congratulations! You have taken the first step to end the kobold threat to the Nashkel mines once and for all.

While your attempts to cause small cave-ins have worked to a certain degree, the kobolds are good burrowers. You may have to do more to block the kobolds from coming back in the future. Finish the job to get full credit for completing this goal.

All this took some time, especially since they had to go around a few still active traps like the Flame Tongue spell. But thanks to having destroyed two Heart Stones already, the respawn timer didn't end while they were doing it. They were back with the two scouts and exploring the second half of the floor soon after, having only dealt with three small patrols.

Entering the kobold caves, the group found themselves in an almost entirely different area, a mix of natural caves and kobold tunnels. It was a veritable warren, with traps in numerous places and enemies. In the next several hours the group fought their way through three ambush points and four patrols.

The patrols in this area were more numerous, twelve kobolds with half at least in Hide-in-Shadows. But they were also more complacent, moving around smaller zones in the warren of tunnels the kobold side of the floor seemed to be. This allowed the Adventurers to, astonishingly, circle a few of these patrols a few times, wiping each patrol out easily. They also, thankfully, didn't run into any more Grey Oozes, despite the number of standing water sources growing several times.

The ambush points were more troublesome, simply because each of them was centered around one or even two traps that Imoen couldn't disarm. Dealing with this ate up Jaheira and Edwin's summoning spells, but the wreckage of the ambushes that remained after the traps went off were easy enough to deal with.

All of this took nearly five hours, and the respawn time was just over two hours away when Imoen discovered what they were looking for and more.

{the section above and below was rewritten to add in the night's sleep before the battle. If you see any hints of the previous version – someone else being tired, a mention of the magic users running out of spells, please point it out.}

OOOOOOO

Imoen was tired once more. Even getting six hours sleep hadn't been enough, and while Branwen and Jaheira had healed her to almost two-thirds health, that didn't help much with her mental exhaustion. *And my Mild Claustrophobe debuff doesn't help matters. Damn this body sometimes. Honestly, endurance used to be one of my strongest qualities. In so many ways, heh.*

Shaking her head of the time she'd literally ridden Charlie Weasley into unconsciousness, Imoen concentrated on her surroundings once more. She had a job to do.

The party had basically been crisscrossing this segment of the mine, clearing and mapping out one side of the main tunnel and then the other. In this manner, they had been able to turn the tables on enemy patrols many times. They had just left a passageway that ended in water that looked disturbingly deep, the second such they had found, and now the Adventurers were skirting around the end of the main tunnel they had entered the kobold

tunnels from. However, as Imoen hugged the right wall, she felt it end in another entranceway to what she first thought was another tunnel.

Although this one was marked by a trap which Boo spotted, chittering into her ear. Stopping Minsc, Imoen moved forward and began to deactivate the trap, noting that this tunnel seemed to have staircases built into it. *So, the entrance to the next floor maybe? It's wide too, that's annoying. Harry and the other meat shields will have to spread out and won't be in mutual support.*

Imoen was thinking in those terms because she could see the light of several fires ahead of them down those wide stairs. Moving back to Minsc, she told him what she saw in low tones, then moved on to the other end of the intersection, where she had also seen another tunnel.

This one had two puddles of water that Imoen glared at in suspicion. Boo, too seemed to tense as he stared at them, but the two of them moved past with no trouble. Soon they came upon a thinner tunnel, which she passed through so slowly, staring at the ground with deadly intent. But on the other side, past another body of water, was a tunnel leading down. It was the only place in the kobold den that had wooden beams, and the stairs went down very steeply, so much so it created noticeable darkness there.

Shaking her head, Imoen placed a trap there, then another on the narrow passage, before two more were put by the two puddles of water. *Well, I call them puddles, but they look too deep for that, really.*

Minsc had waited there by the two puddles, and they nodded at one another before moving back to the others, reporting what they had found. When they did, though, they found the group looking somewhat grim, or in the case of Edwin, jaundiced and amused. *That seems to be his normal state of being, I suppose.* The others were easier to read. "What's wrong?"

"I can hear someone down that way," Jaheira announced, pointing down the wide stairs to the right, which Imoen had bypassed at first. "Someone is cursing in Elvish."

"Be careful, you two. We're not going to run in to rescue whoever it is, but we need more information," Harry said, looking at Imoen even more than Minsc.

"Right. We'll be back." Imoen replied for the both of them.

About a hundred yards on, Imoen also began to hear the cursing. *Mind you, I can't speak Elvish, but the tone of cursing is universal.*

The wide stairs quickly halted in what was another natural cave. In the center of which was another Heart Stone and a strong force of kobolds. Imoen counted at least fourteen kobold commandos, four shamans again, along with thirty regular kobolds armed with swords and bows. They were all gathered around four fires or moving about their own business, although thankfully, Imoen and Boo could not see any traps among them.

More importantly, the source of the cursing was obvious at the far end of the cavern. There, a cage dangled above the ground by a good foot from a long chain that seemed to go up around a stalagmite. Inside was an Elven man with blue hair, delicate features, and a hard angular face, one that was now locked in a rictus of hate as it looked around at the kobolds all around them.

Staring at him, then around, Imoen decided to push her luck. *What is life without risk?* With that, she stood up on tiptoe, whispering in Minsc's ear. "Stay here, and keep me covered. I'm going to try to get close to that guy. I want to know why he's here."

Minsc didn't dare reply with more than a nod, unwilling to even try to reply verbally. *Heh, at least he knows his normal volume setting is the equivalent of loud to the rest of us.*

With the Ranger covering her with his bow, Imoen made her way forward, moving around the edge of the cavern between the kobolds with difficulty. They didn't exactly like staying still for some reason, bouncing all over the place, snarling and snapping at one another.

Eventually, Imoen was by the cage, where she hid behind it in the deepest shadow she could find. There she leaned in, whispering in as low a voice as she could manage, "Don't react and don't look around you. Just keep glaring like you are. My name's Imoen, and I'm with a band of adventurers. Were you part of the original adventurers sent into these caves?"

The man had stilled instantly as she spoke, his face going from a rictus of fury to something more like carved granite before slowly subsiding, slumping against the back of the cage as if his anger had completely drained him. The kobolds who noticed all laughed and snickered.

Thankfully, none of the kobolds saw Imoen because the only light in the cavern- or beyond it - was supplied by their large cook fires, which rather nicely killed the kobolds' night vision. So even if they might have been able to see her in the shadows, once her speaking caused her Hide-In-Shadows skill to cut out, they wouldn't now.

"My name is Xavier, and no, I was a single adventurer. I come from Evereska. I was sent to discover what was going on here, as Baldur's Gate is but several weeks journey from our borders. I was able to make my way down to this level and beyond to the one who is controlling the kobolds, a wizard named Mulligan. But there, my potions of invisibility ran out at a most untimely moment, and he was able to capture me before handing me off to these kobolds."

"So rumors of the troubles along the Sword Coast have reached that far?" Imoen murmured, shaking her hand. "That's not good."

Xan might have smiled, although it was so minute that Imoen had trouble making it out in the dim light of the cooking fires. "Indeed not. Faerun can ill afford the turmoil of the Kraken and the Giant going to war."

That took Imoen a bit to work out until Imoen remembered the talks she'd witness back in the Friendly Arm in Baldur's Gate was best known for its large, powerful navy, while Amn was a mercantile nation with a decent-sized army but whose navy was small and defensive. The analogy made some sense then. "Okay, I guess. What's one more group of wannabe do-gooders," she muttered in some amusement. "So if we break you out, would you agree to work with us?"

"Yes," Xan answered instantly. "Although there is a condition. When I was captured, my moon blade was stolen from me. I will have it back. If after the battle is won, you do not help me find my blade or try to keep it from me, you and yours will become my enemy."

Imoen shrugged. "Since I don't even know what a moonblade is, I don't see that happening, so no worries. Sit tight. I'll be back with friends." With that, she turned, activated Hide-in-Shadows, and was gone before Xan could say another word.

OOOOOO

"And you say this place doesn't have any hidden alcoves or other passages?" Harry asked. The second Heart Stone and the fact the passages to the north and south of it that had hidden more enemies had caused them a lot of trouble. "No cover, no way for them to retreat or get behind us? No water that could hide slimes?"

Imoen nodded. "No other entrances but this one. I checked around the edges just in case there were any fake walls. I didn't find any, although I found more glass vials, already full of samples of that solution they add to the iron. And no water either, not past the start of the stairs. There's those two," she gestured to their right, "But I already set traps down there."

"All right, how many traps did you see?"

"Several, mostly around the entranceway, and the only reason I could see them at all is that I went around them the first time, and Boo was able to spot them from the other side," Imoen knew that Harry already knew where those were, thanks to the Map ability, but it had to be said aloud for the others since only Harry could see his map.

"Thank you, Branwen. And I think that means we are ready to do this. Let's go save this elf and then finish this dungeon," Harry intoned. "I don't know about any of you, but I am missing the sky, something fierce. And this time, we're going to do something a bit different. Oh, and Edwin, Jaheira? You can use fire spells now. I think there's enough air coming in and evidence to say that there are no other explosive gases in this segment of the mine. And if the kobolds haven't suffocated themselves from all the fires in there, there's enough air, too."

"And if there isn't, we have a spell to deal with it," Imoen quipped. She had taken the time that morning to teach Harry the Bubblehead Charm with Dynaheir and Edwin both watching, taking notes with interest. Both seemed hopeful that they could eventually figure out how to use the same spells without sacrificing their health doing it.

Both magic users looked pleased, and Harry went on, explaining the battle plan. Imoen and Minsc would start the battle at the back of the group this time. Since the traps were in the direct center of the kobolds, they couldn't get to them. Instead, Jaheira would use one of her summoning spells to deal with them, while the two scouts would keep an eye on the pools of water near the left side of the entrance.

At the front of the group, Harry, Khalid and Branwen at once more formed the top of the formation, Hammer Time. Harry had the center, was on Branwen on one side and Khalid on the other. Behind them, Dynaheir was poised with her Stinking Cloud attack and Edwin with a fireball. After that, Jaheira would use her Summon Animal spell to spring the various traps within the large cavern. Meanwhile, the two magic users would deal with their alternates among the kobolds.

"Ready?" Harry asked the others.

They all nodded, and Harry hefted his longsword in one hand and his tower shield on his other before breathing in deeply. "All right, now!"

With that, the front line trooped around the corner and down the stairs into the cavern, spreading out as they came, which, alas, broke the formation. This meant they wouldn't have its buffs going forward. Behind them, the others waited a heartbeat before moving in.

The trio in the lead was spotted almost instantly. The kobolds began to chatter and jump towards them, grab up weapons, or begin spells. This was halted almost at once when Edwin's fireball struck the center of the cavern, expanding outwards, slaying more than a dozen of the enemy. "Hahaha! Yes, yes! Die in magical fire and know your place in regards to that of one who wields the true power of Magic!"

The next second, a series of fire Arrows from Dynaheir followed along the edge of the cavern.

But the kobold commandos were much more numerous here in any previous fights, with more spawning in groups of six from the Heart Stone as the fire from Edwin's Fireball faded. With his tower shield +1, Harry was still more than capable of ignoring the arrows shot at him. Khalid's defensive bonus when wielding his longsword also came into play, his medium shields a blur as it bounced off arrows away, or the arrows simply hammering harmlessly into his plate mail.

Branwen had only the Amulet of Protection, and this wasn't nearly as good. She collapsed instantly, taking an arrow to the thigh, again, and another one to the shin of the same leg. But she shattered the shafts with her hammer and stood up roaring in a fury, trusting Jaheira to heal her, which the druid began to do almost instantly. "Come fellows! Come and face the hammer of Tempus!"

Since her next blow caved in the head of a kobold to it closed with her, Harry supposed she was still all right and turned back to slay the first kobold to reach him with a simple thrust before chopping into the shoulder of the next. Keeping an eye on the entire battlefield was difficult, but by this point, Harry had gained enough experience with it to do so and to keep himself safe, his sword flickering in and out, lashing at the kobolds as they closed, his Sword and Shield style protecting him in turn.

Behind him, the Magic Missiles flew into one shaman just before he could get his spell off. Yet this didn't kill the shaman, and Harry wondered why until he noticed that this shaman wasn't marked as a shaman in his Observation skill, but a kobold Shaman Elite.

The next level up from a normal shaman, most of that upgrade comes in a single area: health. Yes, even kobolds know that they are simply too squishy to survive a battle with the other races most of the time. This shaman has survived to gather such power that he has actually been able to do something about that limitation.

However, it didn't save him. This was because when Dynaheir's Magic Missiles hit him a second later, his own spell backfired. This caused a backlash that turned him into a fiery pillar rather than one of the attackers.

But two of the enemy shaman did get their spells off, and flights of stinging bugs raced toward the attackers. "Edwin and Dynaheir fall back!" Harry shouted, hoping that Jaheira's immunity to stinging bugs would hold here. It did, and the next second, her last spell, Nature's call, lashed out, crashing into one of the shamans, who died most spectacularly.

At the same time, the second wave of stinging bugs came towards Harry and his fellows in the front line. It had been targeted at them this time rather than the two wizards behind them. Seeing this, Harry decided to try out something. Killing a kobold, he then thrust forward with the hand holding his sword in the direction of the incoming swirl of bugs. "Stupefy!"

The Stupefy spell lanced out above the heads of the kobolds and crashed into the swarm that he had targeted. The entire swarm collapsed, all of the bugs within it knocked out. The second swarm came on, though, the first having shielded it with its own bodies, and Harry grimaced as it hit him, then quickly spread to Khalid and Branwen despite the fact they had spread out.

Being already injured, Branwen yelped and shrieked, but Jaheira was quick to use another healing spell on her. Fast enough that Branwen didn't break and flee.

Khalid too yelped and shimmered, slapping at himself. But he didn't break either, his Willpower for once being enough to keep him in the fight. But he also began to suffer from a harsh defensive penalty.

Khalid has been struck by stinging bugs.

Although he has resisted the fear and confusion aspect of this attack, attempting to swat at the bugs biting him with his shield hand will pay a - 4 penalty to all defenses.

This proved to be nearly deadly a second later, as an enemy kobold got underneath Khalid's sword strike and lashed out with a blow at his stomach. His chest plate saved him, the blow ringing against his armor, but the blow knocked him off balance, causing him to stumble back. A pommel strike sword dealt with that enemy, and Harry turned back to his own part of the fight just in time to use his longsword to block a similar blow that would've taken him in the side.

More kobolds continued to pile in, while more commandos also appeared along with more Shamans summoned by the Heart Stone. This forced the long-range shooters, who included Imoen now, to target them, leaving the three scattered frontline fighters to face the tide on their own.

A fireball lanced out over the battle line, crashing into the center of the room, slaying several recently summoned commandos before they could join the battle and causing more of the kobolds at the back of the melee to break and run for the corners of the room. It also caused Xan some pain, although not directly, simply by the heat of the fire. "Watch where you are flinging that mortal!"

"Beware, prisoner, my name is Edwin, and mortal or no, I am certainly far better than an elf whose own incompetence allowed him to be captured against such meager opponents."

At the same time, Dynaheir had stepped forward as Branwen paused to heal herself, kneeling down to let the other woman thrusting her hands over Branwen's head. From her hands, the spell Burning Hands created a tongue of flame which in all several of the attacking kobolds, forcing them back.

Then Branwen was standing up, nodding her thanks to the other woman, and the attack continued, while Harry used another Blood Magic spell, a cutting spell slicing an area clear of kobolds for a moment before more piled in from either side of him, causing him to grimace.

There were still too many of the enemy, and the front line was still dealing with the stinging bugs, and Branwen's arrow luck continued, with several of the enemy commandos shooting at her. She blocked them all but doing so caused her to open her defenses once more, and an instant later a blow caught her on the back of her knee, which nearly severed the limb. It was only saved by a hasty Lay On Hands spell while Dynaheir defended her. But to heal herself she would have to fall back, else she would open herself up to more injury. "Gah, what it is with you little creatures and attacking my legs! It is a coward's tactic!"

"They can only reach so high Branwen, and I thought we already established their general cowardice." Slaying another kobold in front of him, Harry lashed out with another Cutting spell, slicing through large segments of the mob in front of Branwen's position, gaining her some time to breathe. "Pull back, Branwen. Minsc, get up here and replace Branwen."

Branwen protested this half-heartedly, but she really couldn't heal herself and fight at the same time. And Jaheira had turned her attention to aiding her husband.

The next second, Harry took an arrow to his shoulder, then a slice to his helmet, which was nearly knocked from his head. Khalid had taken several Fire Arrows, and it was only his wife's healing spells that kept him from being crippled as Branwen had been. "Khalid, fall back. We need to shrink the line. Dynaheir, Stinking Cloud to one side, Jaheira, Tangling vines to the other, then the back of the mob."

Dynaheir had already begun to concentrate on the melee combatants, so she obeyed with alacrity. Meanwhile, another stupefy allowed the two remaining frontline fighters to fall back. And then Minsc was beside Harry, wielding his giant longsword Claymore.

Almost instantly, the remaining enemy kobold commandos stopped trying to fire ineffectually at Harry, whose tower shield had still staved off almost all of their fire. Instead, they fired over his head into the rest of the party and at Minsc. For Minsc, his Chest Plate +1 much the same job as Harry's tower shield. He took a few hits to his legs, but even they were somewhat armored with leather jerkins, and the two arrows that stuck simply made the large man laugh.

Dynaheir, on the other hand? She nearly fell, crying out in pain at the wound to her chest, and Edwin cursed, canceling a spell when an arrow nearly took him in the head, and another struck him in the shoulder.

Harry twisted around shouting out, "Hold the line, Minsc, Khalid!" and grabbed at Dynaheir, who had moved behind him, about to use another Burning Hands spell. Swiftly grabbing at her arms, Harry held her on her feet and used his Lay On Hands paladin skill.

The wound healed, but Dynaheir was still weak and was out of the fight for now. Meanwhile Edwin backed away rapidly, although thankfully his own robes had a fire-resistance spell which saved him from the damage of the Fire arrow to the chest. He had then lashed out with another Magic Missile spell, killing that commando as still more spawned.

Gritting his teeth, Harry moved back into the front of the line, and he and Minsc made short work of the kobolds which attacked them. However, the enemy commandos, now having built up their numbers again after Edwin's decimation, proved again that they were the main threat, as the rest of their party was being forced backward and away from them, and more arrows were getting through all of their defenses, so much so that Harry ordered Branwen to not join them just yet. Her armor was the worst of them all, and she had already used too many of her healing spells for one battle. "We have to break through the rest of this horde. Jaheira, are there any more shamans?"

"No, Edwin dealt with the last one right before he fell back," Jaheira reported, having kept up with the melee line rather than retreating, trusting in her helmet and better armor.

“No more have been spawned, but there are at least fourteen new kobold commandos in there, and I just saw two more appear.”

Harry growled, then glanced at his health bar, which was in the orange thanks to the injuries he had taken and the spells he had already used. Imoen had used some spells to help guard the side of the cavern Jaheira had used Tangling Vines are, and despite their rest and the healing this morning, they were both hovering at around half health. But there was no help for it. “Imoen Stupefy in front of you.”

Knowing it would be the last spell he could use, Harry lashed out with a stupefy spell at the same time as Imoen. The group of kobolds directly in front of him and Khalid collapsed, leaving only a handful directly in front of Minsc. “Now, Branwen, help Minsc!”

With that, Harry and Khalid charged forward, pushing the unconscious bodies or stepping on them in their haste to get across the cavern to the kobold commandos. Two more fire arrows struck Harry, and his health bar began to blink crazily at him, the last spell having pushed him down into the red. But then another fireball from Edwin was skirting over his head to crash directly into the center of the room. The Heart Stone shattered, and the damage of its shards and the fireball did in most of the group of regular kobolds, along with many of the kobold commandos.

The others Minsc dealt with, hacking them to pieces, as Harry nearly skidded, slamming his shield into one, then slicing another head off, before his blade was back up and stabbing. But once more, his sword proved to not be immune to the iron issue and shattered.

Harry took a blow to his forearm before his war hammer appeared in his hand, and he began to lay about with it all around.

That left only the enemy who had previously broken, fleeing to the edges of the cavern, and Imoen and Jaheira moved quickly to silence them along with Khalid. Minsc and Branwen dealt with the group in front of the large man while Harry leaned against the wall, breathing in deeply, feeling almost anemic now, since most of the damage he'd taken had been dealt by using his spells.

Staring at the message informing him of the destruction of the Heart Stone that was followed by several dozen more messages about the traps Imoen had left behind doing their work, Harry slowly breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, ladies and gentlemen, who is up for some food, and healing?”

This won laughing approval from even the two half-elves, and he chuckled as Jaheira and Branwen both knelt beside him, their hands flashing as they used a Medium Healing Spell each on Harry. That left Branwen below half her prepared healing spells, with Jaheira only slightly better.

They were interrupted by a cough from the cage as Zan made himself known once more. "That is all well and good, but if you wouldn't mind releasing me now!?"

Harry gestured, and Imoen moved over to the cage, releasing the man. He looked at them all as he stood up to his full height, showing that he was actually a little taller than Harry, although not as tall as Minsc, and nowhere near as built as either of the human men. Indeed, he was almost as lithe and scrawny as Imoen.

"I think you for freeing me, but I must retrieve my moon blade," the man said, sighing and shaking his head.

"Wait, you can't expect to do that alone," Harry objected. "This is a dungeon, we have yet to meet the Dungeon Boss, and I don't doubt it's this Mulligan fellow that you mentioned to Imoen. That means he'll be stronger and tougher than you might expect. "

"Besides, you are in no shape just yet to fight someone like that. One would think that your mishap earlier would teach you some caution, Jaheira interjected tartly, moving over to heal Minsc from a few of his wounds.

Xan glared at her then said something Elvish to her and Khalid, which caused both of their backs to straighten, but Jaheira replied equally sharply. The man recoiled, and Jaheira turned away.

"Translation, please?" Harry requested as he stood up and began to move to the cleanest portion of the cavern to start a cooking fire.

Khalid shook his head, his normal stutter giving his words an odd staccato rhythm. "He said something about us proving ourselves only too human when we did not see the importance of his moonblade. Jaheira replied by saying that that is an ancient misconception and that his attack on us was itself unworthy of one of the Greycloaks of Everska."

"...I'm missing a lot off of the social understanding. I need to understand the nuances there, aren't I?" Harry sighed.

"Indeed," Khalid laughed before going on in his normal stutter. "And I didn't translate entirely. Suffice it to say that if the man had not just been rescued from durance vile, I would have words with him."

Jaheira's, muttering about how she wouldn't even bother with words and that the pointy end of her scimitar would find a new sheathe, told Harry far more. He looked angrily over at the man, shaking his head in disgust. "I was going to offer my group's help in getting your moon blade back. After all, we have to face this Mulligan fellow ourselves, so adding one more reason to do so wouldn't be much trouble. Now, I'm wondering if you're actually worth it if that's your attitude after having been saved."

The elf sighed and seemed to shrink in on himself, making him seem even less healthy than before. “I, I apologize. For my people, being captive like that is extremely trying on the spirit, and to think of another touching my moonblade made it even worse. I take back my words and to you and to your half-elf companions.”

He then said something else in Elvish and bowed from the waist, arms out before him, then drawing them in as he stood up. This seemed to mollify Khalid, although Jaheira still looked very annoyed. But she didn’t look as if she was going to attack the fellow any longer, which was a plus in Harry’s book.

“Minsc, Branwen, Khalid, if you wouldn’t mind seeing to the bodies on the other side of the cavern? I don’t want them near where we’re going to be sitting and eating.”

With more Harry-made food on the offing, Minsc and the others set to with a will. Earning some points in the book, Xavier moved over to help, again apologizing under his breath for his earlier words. Soon enough, a light stew and some bread were finished, with slices of venison from Nashkel made into tiny steaks searing merrily over the fire.

Staring at the food, Xan gulped, shaking his head in awe. “That, that looks amazing, especially when considering we are deep in a dungeon. But I, I suppose if we go to face a dungeon boss, it could be considered our last meal.”

“That’s a rather morose thought,” Imoen grumbled. “You can eat jerky if you keep talking like that.”

“While I wouldn’t go that far, I would say that telling us everything you know about the next floor and Mulligan would help us survive, wouldn’t it?” Harry questioned. “So why don’t you tell us what you can...”

End Chapter

So remember when I said this dungeon wouldn’t be as dangerous? I lied. The reason: traps. Duh. That was a major part of this chapter, an area that didn’t really make an impact in the Gnoll Fortress. I want Imoen to start playing with them now since that and her Magic will create a pretty amazing mixture in the future. That, and the Fear spell, and the sheer number of kobolds. But I will point out I didn’t go into every battle, or indeed the majority. Only those fights which were different and important.

Now, this is not where I wanted to end this chapter. But frankly, finishing what I have has taken so long it’s cut into **Fate** time as it is. And I was also reminded that cliffhangers are evil, so here we go. I hope you enjoyed this as I gave Imoen and her Thief skills real time to shine, showed how dangerous the kobolds can be on their own ground, and didn’t, I think, get bogged down in every fight. But I wanted to make it clear that dungeons are still tough, whatever their inhabitants.