

120: Choice

A badly-whistled tune battled against the silence of the falling snow as Carten dug. He was covered in blood; finishing the beast had been messy work. Sticky and unpleasant though it was, however, he'd kept his soiled armor on, only setting aside his shields so he could dig properly. It didn't seem likely that any more monsters would show up, but there was no need to be reckless.

The area where they'd fought the Frostbear Spirit Caller looked like it had been hit by an avalanche. Several buildings had collapsed, and those that hadn't were almost entirely buried. Carten paused, looking around, then laughed and returned to his whistling. *This lair's a fuckin' brat! Threw a right proper tantrum.*

After a few minutes, Carten grunted, then tossed aside the broken board he'd been using as a shovel. The pile below him shifted, then collapsed slightly. Shortly afterward, a black gauntlet punched its way up through the wreckage, scraping at the surface of the snow.

"There ya are, Little Mouse!" Carten boomed, reaching down to grab the hand. He set his feet, then *pulled*.

"Wait!" Rain cried, his voice muffled.

Carten snorted and pulled harder, dragging the man up through the snow and then tossing him clear. The wreckage groaned and shifted beneath him, and Carten had to whirl his arms to keep his balance. Fortunately, things settled after a moment.

Carten grinned, peering down into the hole. "Who's next?"

"Damn it, Carten," Rain said, clambering to his feet. "Be careful."

"Bah, yer fine," Carten said. "Jus' a little snow."

"Mind stepping aside, friend?" Mlem called from within the hole, interrupting Rain's response. Carten looked down to see the bald merchant peering up at him, gesturing with a hand that held a smooth stone.

Carten blinked, then grinned sheepishly as he stepped aside. *Yep. That's a better plan.*

The skipping stone flew out of the hole, and Mlem, Samson, and Jamus appeared with a pop. "You'll help me recharge this, right?" Mlem asked, looking at Rain and holding up the skipping stone.

"Yeah, no problem," Rain said.

"Good," Mlem said. He tossed the stone back into the hole and vanished with another pop.

Carten turned to Jamus, grinning. "How was the mill?"

Jamus snorted, shaking snow from his cloak. "Oh, shut up, you oaf. Not everybody has a skull harder than the hailstones."

Carten grinned wider, knocking on his helmet with his knuckles. "That's what the helmet's fer, Jamus. Ya should wear one instead o'tha' stupid hat. 'Sides, hail is ice, which ain't stronger'en bone nohow."

"I know that, Carten," Jamus said with a sigh. "I was being facetious."

Carten laughed. "Me too, ya dumbshit."

Jamus snorted. "You don't even know what that word means, do you?"

Carten just grinned at him. There was a pop, and Mlem appeared again, this time with Lyn and Tahir. Tahir stumbled away, then slumped to the ground and dropped his helmet. His curly black hair was matted down with sweat.

Carten frowned, checking his party display. It said the man was fine, but he was trembling and gasping for breath. *Hmm. That woulda been a bloody rough fight fer a dull.* He shivered, thinking of the dead villagers. *Bloody rough fight fer me, too, if Rain hadn't been there. There were a lot o the creepy fucks.* He shook his head, then waved at Rain, forcing a grin back onto his face. "Oi, Rain." He gestured at his bloody armor as Rain looked over. "Wanna do somethin' about this? Damn bear leaked all over me."

"You should have come with us, Carten," Rain said, activating his cleaning aura.

Carten grinned, rotating his shoulder as the white light erased the blood that had soaked into his cloak. "Nah," he said, pointing. "Bear's over there. Figure'n it's got a bunch a Tel in it, and it'd be hard ta find under all the snow, seein' as yer findin' spell ain't workin' right."

"That's...surprisingly thought out," Rain said. "But still, it was dangerous."

"Pfft," Carten said. "More dangerous'n gettin' crushed by a roof?"

"Point," Rain said, "but it's a good thing that we went back to the mill. It turns out that there's something under it—the way forward, I think. The entrance opened when the Spirit Caller died, but we didn't go down. Detection says that there's a room down there, but we didn't go down the stairs to check."

"Oh?" Carten said, scratching at his ear. "Why not?"

"We'll come back to it," Rain said, glancing at the others. "First, let's deal with that bear, then find a sturdy building and warm up."

"Right, right," Said Carten, brushing some snow from his cloak. "Anyone bring anything to eat?"

"Mind if I sit?"

Tahir stiffened, seeing Lord Darr staring down at him. He flinched away from his gaze, feeling the noble's icy blue eyes drilling into him. There was an awkward pause, then Lady Draves answered.

"Of course not, Lord Darr. Please, sit," she said, shifting to make room for him on the padded sofa where she was resting. The three of them were in the sitting room of a large merchant's house, a fire burning merrily in the hearth.

"Thank you, Lady Draves," Lord Darr said. "Please, just call me Samson."

"In that case, Lyn," said Lady Draves.

"Of course," said Lord Darr, nodding. He took the offered seat, leaning his sheathed sword against the side of the sofa. "How are you two doing?"

Tahir didn't respond, shifting slightly on his wooden chair. He hadn't spoken more than a word or two to the man before this. He was a simple hunter; he wasn't used to dealing with nobles.

Lady Draves blew a blast of air through her lips. "I feel like I'm in over my head," she said, running a hand through her loose hair. "This lair is insane. Those...things..." She shook her head. "I can still hear the screams."

"Mmm," Lord Darr said, nodding. "I've seen battle, but that..." he shuddered, then shook his head and let out a slow hiss through his teeth. "That was something else entirely."

"How can they be so calm about it?" Lady Draves asked, gesturing toward the door. "Rain and the others."

"I don't think they are as calm as they seem," Lord Darr said. "They just hide the fear better than we do."

Tahir shook his head. "They aren't hiding anything," he mumbled. He froze as he realized that the two nobles had turned to stare at him.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Lord Darr asked.

Tahir took a steadying breath, tightening his fingers on his bow, which was sitting across his lap. He forced himself to look up, meeting their gaze. "I said, they aren't hiding anything. They're not afraid, not like...me." He shook his head. *I'm useless here.* He coughed, his throat still raw from the smoke. "I'm just a hunter. I'm not ready for something like...that."

Lyn laughed. "I don't think *anyone* could be ready for *that*."

"The captain was," Tahir said, the words coming more easily now. "He burned them all like kindling." He shivered. *He could kill all of us in a flash, if he wanted to.* Looking back down, Tahir gripped his bow even tighter. It was a simple thing, but well crafted. He'd made it himself and had used it both to feed his family and to defend himself in the wilds.

He shook his head. *A toy. Nothing but a toy.*

He looked back up. "Did you have any idea he was that strong?"

"The captain?" Lord Darr asked.

Tahir nodded.

"I had some idea, yes," Lord Darr said. "Captain Rain was there when I earned my awakening. His power isn't that surprising, given his level."

Lady Draves shook her head. "No, Tahir has a point. I don't know what's more terrifying, the captain or the monsters. I know you can't feel it, Samson, but there's this feeling around him. It's like...pressure. It's suffocating. And when he gets mad..." she sighed, rubbing at the bridge of her nose. "Objectively, I know he's not that strong. Not compared to Ameliah, let alone Velika and her ilk. Rain just *feels* stronger. I can't explain it."

"Mmm," Lord Darr said. "I'm not sure what to make of that, honestly. That pressure thing. It wasn't there when I met him before." He shook his head, then looked at Tahir. "Rain is..." He paused, then shrugged. "You don't need to be afraid of him. You know his reputation, and speaking first hand, he's...soft."

Lady Draves looked at him sharply, and he raised his hands. "I don't mean that badly," he said. "He's got the proper instincts when it comes to battle. I just mean, well. Hmm. He's still beating himself up about the mageburn that you two took, even though his aura's the only reason any of us are alive right now."

"Yeah," Lady Draves said, rubbing at her arms. "I don't blame him for it at all. He did what he needed to. There were hundreds of them. And that bear..." she sighed. "Is this what every lair is going to be like?"

"This one is quite a bit different than the Fells," Lord Darr said. "That was just a swamp with monsters in it. There was a cave part, and this one...*tunnel* that was particularly unpleasant,"

he shuddered, "but other than that, it was normal enough. Rain could feel the monsters coming with that skill of his. They didn't just appear like they did in that mill."

"What do the others have to say about it?" Lady Draves asked. "You talked to them, right? This can't be normal, can it?"

Lord Darr shrugged. "Believe it or not, they're almost as new at this as I am. You know the darkness lair that Carten mentioned a few days ago? The one where Rain almost died? That was their first, apparently. Them, Jamus, and Val. Ameliah guided them through it."

"Really?" Tahir said, shaken out of his silence. He hadn't heard this story. "Captain Rain almost died?"

"Yes, he did, and that wasn't the only time," a voice said from the doorway. Tahir jumped, looking over to see Jamus walk in. He was missing his hat, his wavy brown hair slightly disheveled. "Adventuring isn't an occupation for people with a lot to lose."

"We all knew what we signed up for," Lyn said. She licked her lips uneasily, staring at the mage. "By the way, I never thanked you for saving me. I saw what you did to that...thing."

Tahir grimaced, recalling the way Jamus's magic had detonated the undead villager's skull like an overripe melon. *Another person who could kill me with a thought.*

Jamus merely smiled. "Of course, Miss Draves. Think nothing of it." He joined them at the fire, running his hands through his hair, then holding them out near the flames to warm them. "Anyway, Rain told me to come check on you two," he said. "He wants me to get you to take your potions."

"No," Lyn said, shaking her head. "I'm fine. I'm not going to waste a potion on something like this." She gestured to her face, which still looked a little red. "I didn't even lose my eyebrows."

Tahir nodded in agreement. Potions were too expensive to waste. Besides, he might need his later if he got *really* hurt. "We should save them," he said, fighting to keep the rasp from his voice.

Jamus sighed, then reached off to his left, making a motion like turning an invisible page in the air. "That's what I told him, but he feels horrible about hurting you. Your health is fine. It says so right here." He pointed, though obviously no one else could see his interface. "Your stamina is a bit low, Miss Draves, but we'll have a little while to rest yet."

"We're really going to continue?" Lord Darr asked.

Jamus shrugged. "I think we can, and the others certainly want to, but Rain, I'm less sure about."

"Is it his mana?" Lady Draves asked. "Is he low?"

"That's not it at all," Jamus said with a chuckle. "Rain, low on mana. Ha."

Rain floated in the void of Aura Focus, his eyes darting across the cluttered windows hanging in front of him. He'd made sure to keep the party display front and center, as it would let him know if there was any trouble while he worked to regenerate his mana. Occasional pulses of Detection weren't enough to quiet his fears completely. Watching everyone's health made him feel better.

Essed Frostbarrows			
Rank 9			
66.6%			
Frontline			
	Health	Stamina	Mana
Carten	100%	94%	100%
Samson Darr	100%	78%	100%
Mlemlek Ko'Latti	100%	84%	100%
Lyn Aleuas Draves	94%	65%	100%
Backline			
	Health	Stamina	Mana
Rain	100%	100%	90%
Val	100%	84%	100%
Jamus	100%	74%	100%
Tahir	97%	72%	100%

Rain narrowed his eyes. *Damn it, Jamus. Just pour it down their throats if you have to.* He sighed and shook his head in the darkness. A sudden flicker from one of the open windows caught his eye, and Rain shifted his gaze, quickly spotting the offending numeral. His statbuff tolerance had just ticked up. He snorted, then used his ring to add one more point into Clarity.

Every little bit helps.

With a gesture, he pushed aside a script he was working on, moving the window so he could check his status.

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
4,247	22,750	856,330

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
HP	940	940	100/d
SP	600	600	100/d
MP	7,020	7,800	0.1/s

Dark Revenant's Armor

	CUR	MAX	RGN
DUR	13,338	13,338	0
SAT	0	13,202	-92/s
CHG	9,908	14,209	-65/d

Attributes

177/157	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	BUFF	SYN
STR	16	47	10	37/37	34%
RCV	4.4	10	10	0/27	44%
END	9.36	30	10	20/16	36%
VGR	4.7	10	10	0/37	47%
FCS	10	10	10	0/50	100%
CLR	320	320	200	120/125	100%

Resistances

70/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	23.0	0%
COLD	3.0	0%
LIGHT	3.0	0%
DARK	53.0	0%
FORCE	3.0	0%
ARCANE	3.0	0%
CHEMICAL	3.0	0%
MENTAL	3.0	0%

As he reviewed the numbers, Rain noticed that his current mana had increased to 7,021. Frowning, he hunted through the sea of windows to find a blank console. Finally locating one, he shifted his keyboard focus, then typed in a command to drop the level of Mana Manipulation by 0.2mp/s. Configuring the spell through his terminal gave him much greater precision than doing it mentally would have.

He waited until his mana dropped back down to exactly 90%, then nulled out the error completely. This time, he used a different script, one that set Mana Manipulation to equal his net mana income. He checked the debug output in the terminal and smiled.

23.1 mana per second. A new personal best, I think.

Technically, his regeneration was slightly higher than that. 540mp/hr was consumed by Winter. Rain mentally shrugged. *Probably lost within the rounding error.* He set that train of thought aside, flicking his eyes to the panel for Mlem's skipping stone, which he was currently charging.

Havenheild Skipping Stone

- Material: Grand Arcane Basalt

Skipping Rune Complex

- When thrown, user and objects/entities of focus will be transported to the location of the stone upon coming to rest.
- Cost: 18.8 mp/kg
- Limit: 573.3 kg
- Limit: 20.5 m
- Cooldown: 5s

Skipping Safety Rune Complex

- Skipping Rune Complex will not activate if insufficient space is available at the target destination.
- Skipping Rune Complex will not activate if insufficient power is available for transit.
- Skipping Rune Complex will not activate if the distance to the stone exceeds specified range.

Return Rune Complex

- With focus, return the stone to the user's hand, provided that it has been less than 30 seconds since the throw.
- Cost: 100mp
- Limit: 20.5 m
- Cooldown: 5s

Greater Mana Core

- Material: Grand Arcane Gold (10%)
- Material: Grand Arcane Lead (90%)
- **Greater Mana Capacitance Rune**
 - 41,209/45,000 mp
 - Import Efficiency: 98%
 - Export Efficiency: 0%

Inscription Rune

A genuine Havenheild product

Serial Number: 0034

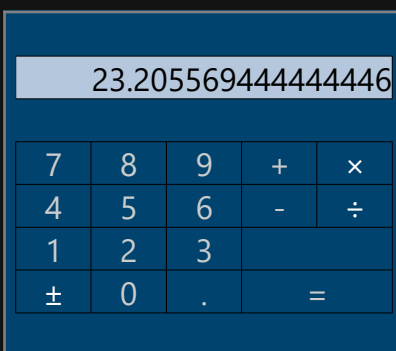
Warning: Excessive metal or non-mundane materials in the environment at either end of transit may disrupt the function of the artifact.

The Havenheild Company is not responsible for any death, dismemberment, or loss of property resulting from use of this artifact.

Rain shook his head, skimming over the description again. He'd almost choked the first time he'd seen it. The skipping stone had a significantly larger mana capacity than he'd expected, but that wasn't the half of it. It was stupid-expensive, judging by what it was made from. And then there was the enchantment itself. Rain already had a list of questions prepped for Ameliah concerning telefrags, plus some less-distressing ones for Tallheart about the mana-storage capability of various materials. At the moment, however, none of that was important. He was only interested in the charge.

Finally. Just two minutes to full. He glanced back at his status. Ah, what the heck. I have time. Let's get the real number for my mana income.

Rain opened his calculator, manually crunching out the exact quantity of mana he was regenerating at the moment, not including the costs for Winter or Mana Manipulation. He didn't technically need to use the calculator for this, but that wasn't the point. He finally had the thing dealing with division properly, so he was damn well going to use it.



Rain blinked, looking at the result. *Oh hey. The cost of Winter actually matters after all. 23.2 and change versus 23.1. I mean, it doesn't MATTER, matter, but still. Who'da thunk it?* Rain glanced back at the display for the skipping stone. *Oh, it's full. Neat.*

After taking a minute to reset his stat balance, Rain started closing windows, making sure that he'd jotted down everything he wanted to remind himself of for later. He'd only been sitting here for less than a half-hour, but he was already anxious to get moving again. They had a lair to clear. The longer they stayed here, the more Ameliah and Tallheart would worry about them.

Right, time to move.

Rain released his hold on Aura Focus and climbed to his feet. His mana would be back at full by the time they finished discussing their plan. Personally, he wanted to continue. The fight had been rough, to be sure, but they'd come out of it *relatively* unscathed. Just some minor burns and some fresh fuel for his nightmares.

Rain frowned, glancing at the party display again, which he'd left open. Lyn and Tahir still hadn't taken their potions. *Fine, you win. I won't force you to take them. Damn macho bullshit.* He shook his head, knowing that he'd likely have done the same. *Hopefully, they've had enough time to calm down by now. I'm not going to force them to go on if they're not up to it.* Rain grimaced, stretching out a kink in his neck. *Ameliah's going to kill me when I tell her about that fight, but damn it, we can't just give up. We can't keep relying on her, even if it's risky. We've got to be independent...*

He snorted. *I've got to be independent. I can't believe she said I snore like a little kitten.*

"Ready to go?" Mlem asked, poking his head into the room.

Rain nodded, walking over to him. He held out his hand, offering him the skipping stone.

"Here."

"Thanks," Mlem said, taking it. He poked at something in the air. "How much mana did you manage to—BY ALL THE GODS IN ALL THE HEAVENS!"

Rain grinned and clapped him on the shoulder, then headed for the stairs.

An hour later, Rain jumped down into the ruins of the mill. His boots hit the floor with a solid thump, muffled by the layer of snow covering the packed earth. It had taken them a while to fully excavate the building, but it was better than leaving it to collapse behind them. It didn't have anything to do with Rain not wanting to use the skipping stone. Not even a little bit.

Rain walked over to the circular hole in the center of the room. The mill equipment had vanished. In its place, there was now a staircase, steps of ice spiraling into the ground. It made a certain sort of sense, the stairs being here. They'd been led to the mill by the sound of the millstone, and then the Spirit Caller had attacked. Now that it was dead, the way forward had been opened. Clearly, they were on the right path.

Rain clicked his tongue. *Video game logic. So weird.*

He shrugged and started his descent. He'd already been down there once, and it was safe enough. Still, he was uneasy. Nobody had seen the staircase appear, and there was nothing saying that it couldn't disappear just as easily, trapping him underground. He didn't think it was likely, though, as lairs had *rules*. There was *always* a path to the core. While it would never be anything close to safe, it would never be *completely* unfair. The tunnels weren't going to collapse on them or anything—at least, not all at once. Probably.

"Shit!" Rain's foot slipped. He whirled his arms, almost falling. It was a near thing, but he managed to catch himself before he fell, the sharp tips of his gauntlets finding traction by digging into the wall like tiny ice picks. After a moment, he relaxed, freeing his hand from the ice and resuming his descent. *Yes, hello, lair design council? OSHA would like a word. It seems that the entrance to your deathtrap is missing a safety rail.*

The walls, floor, and ceiling were pure ice now, transitioning from frozen dirt after the first few meters. A pale blue light shone from the ice, growing stronger as the temperature dropped.

By the time Rain reached the bottom, the light was brighter than moonlight, and the cold fiercer than that of midnight in the depths of winter.

"Finally, Rain," Val said, his breath frosting the air.

The room at the bottom of the stairs was of moderate size, with a ceiling around three meters in height. There were three doorways leading to darkened tunnels, each with a symbol carved into the floor at the entrance. One looked like a shield, another like a sword, and the last like burning flames.

Rain looked around at his companions, activating Immolate as he did to break the chill. From his first trip down here, he knew that there would be no reaction. Slowly, the room warmed as his spell pushed back the frozen air.

"Ahh," Mlem sighed, lowering his hood. "Much better." He rubbed at his mustache, cleaning away his frozen breath. Rain snorted as he saw that Carten was in a similar situation. The big man might not have been bothered by the cold, but his indifference hadn't stopped snotsicles from growing wild in his beard.

"Are you going to be able to keep that up?" asked Val.

"It should be fine," Rain said. "There's no snow to fight me down here. The air should hold the heat well enough for me to keep up, though I'm a bit surprised it's cooled so much since I warmed it with my tests." He walked over to the tunnel near where Val was standing, looking down at the symbol. "Have you figured out what these mean yet?"

Val shook his head. "Not a clue. Something about the three base classes, obviously, but more than that?" He shrugged. "It does do this, though. Check it out." Val moved forward to stand

on the symbol. As soon as his foot touched it, there was a flash of blue light and a blast of arctic air. Rain gasped, stumbling back, but nobody else showed alarm, merely annoyance.

"Depths, Val, I was just starting to feel my toes again," Jamus complained.

Rain wasn't listening, distracted by what he was seeing. The symbol was now glowing with a liquid light, a much more brilliant blue than the surrounding ice. The tunnel was also fully lit now, extending straight as a rail off into the distance. It ended in a wall bearing another copy of the flame symbol, glowing with the same liquid light. The other two tunnels were gone, the walls of the chamber seamless, as if they'd never been there to begin with. The darkened symbols, however, remained on the floor, marking where they'd been.

Rain took a deep breath, letting it out slowly in a freezing plume. *Damn it, I should have told them to wait for me before they tried that. Luckily, it seems pretty harmless. Explains what happened to the warm air, anyway.* Rain controlled his expression, then used Detection lightly on the air. The spell confirmed what he was seeing with his eyes. It was no illusion; the other tunnels were gone.

He tilted his head. *Well, maybe not gone. Sealed, at least.*

From his tests earlier, he knew that the ice wasn't mundane. It was even worse than the snow above—Detection couldn't penetrate more than a few centimeters.

"Okay, I think I see what's going on here," he said, pointing at the symbol beneath Val's feet.

"We're meant to choose one tunnel, and one tunnel only."

"Exactly," Jamus said. "Rain, do you mind warming us up again? *Somebody* decided to demonstrate what the symbols did instead of just explaining it like a civilized being."

Val rolled his eyes.

"Already on it," Rain said, having activated the spell as Jamus spoke. He turned to Val. "So when you take your foot off that, everything changes back?"

"Yeah, after a few seconds," Val said, gesturing. "I sent my light down one of the dark tunnels, but the wall wasn't there at the far end. It's like what you found earlier. Three straight tunnels going further than you could sense with Detection."

"What happens when you go into the tunnel?" Rain asked.

"Nothing," Val said. "The tunnel stays. I didn't go far enough to try the symbol at the end."

Rain nodded. *Good. At least his brain hasn't completely frozen over.*

"The other symbols don't work when one is active," Tahir said, catching Rain's attention. "We made sure no one was in one of the tunnels when we tried that, obviously."

"Mmm," Rain said, nodding. "What if you let it deactivate, then try two at the same time."

"Didn't try it," Lyn said. "Haven't had that long."

"Well, let's try then," Mlem said.

"Why?" Samson asked, pointing down the lit tunnel. "It's obvious. We pick one, and there will be a challenge at the end. It probably depends on the symbol. I vote we take the path marked with the sword."

"No!" Carten laughed, pointing. "That one. Shield."

Mlem ran a hand over his smooth scalp, an exasperated look on his face. "We can't just pick a path!" He twirled, spreading his arms as he gestured toward the sealed tunnels. "Secrets, my friends, secrets! The more obscure the way, the greater the rewards for those that walk it. Rule forty-four. Hmm. What would happen if someone jumps over the symbol without touching it, I wonder? Or if they use the skipping stone?"

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" Jamus asked. "Frozen in the middle of a block of ice for the rest of eternity?"

"Just have Carten do it," said Val.

"Oi," Carten said.

"No," Rain said, sharply. "No skipping stone. We'll test a few more things, but we'll do it *safely*. Then we move on. Ten minutes. Max."

It turned out that they didn't need nearly that long. It truly was a simple choice between three options. The instant anything physical touched one of the symbols or crossed through the plane of the door, the hallway beyond would light up, and the others would be sealed off at the same time. There was no way around it, at least not with the tools available to them. Further, the selected hallway would stay active as long as it was occupied by a person or object. One of Rain's Rocks of Trap Triggering—vital equipment for every adventurer—was currently sitting on the floor of the shield hallway, effectively locking it in place.

"So, shield then?" Jamus asked.

"Oh, why not?" Mlem said. "I suppose we'll find out what it means when we get to the end."

"Yes, shield," Carten said heartily.

"Should someone stay back here, just in case the tunnel seals itself when we get to the end?" Lyn asked.

Rain shook his head, walking to retrieve his stone. He slipped it into his pouch and turned to face the others. "Never split the party."

"Rule seventy-one," Mlem said, nodding to him. "There are exceptions, but not in a situation like this."

"Seventy-one? That high?" Rain said, raising an eyebrow.

Mlem laughed. "I'm a merchant first, and an adventurer second."

Rain snorted. "Come on, let's go." *I wonder what rule one is. Once you have their money, you never give it back?*

Carten led the way down the hallway as usual, with Samson and Lyn bringing up the rear such that the squishy mage-types were in the middle. Rain, not feeling particularly squishy thanks to his armor, felt a bit out of place, but that was fine. They'd discussed their combat formation after the battle with the Spirit Caller, and they'd decided that Rain's role was to protect the unawakened, barring another horde situation. Jamus and Carten were going to be the tip of the spear, as it were.

"The rock again?" Carten asked over his shoulder as they reached the end of the tunnel.

"Yup," Rain said, extracting one from his pouch. He tossed it over Carten's shoulder at the glowing shield symbol, but it simply bounced off, falling to the floor with a clatter. He didn't bother asking Carten to retrieve it for him. He had more. "Touch it with your shield next," he said. "If that doesn't work, try your gauntlet, and only then your bare hand."

"Yes, Mom," Carten said. Lightly, he touched his shield to the wall. The moment he did, there was another blast of cold air, and the barrier vanished, revealing an empty room beyond it, much like the previous one. Unlike the first, however, there were no additional tunnels that Rain could see, either with his eyes or with Detection. Glancing behind them, Rain cursed as he saw that the hallway they'd just traversed had sealed itself at the far end.

"One way forward," Samson said, catching his eye.

"Moving in," Carten said, carefully stepping into the room. Jamus followed, summoning a single Lightning Whip as he did. The others waited, giving them space. Jamus's lightning magic was dangerous, as it didn't distinguish between friend and foe. As Rain inspected the room more closely from the door, he saw a larger version of the shield symbol etched into the floor at the center, though it was dark at the moment.

"Not usin' two, Jamus?" Carten asked, stomping toward the symbol. Feeling safe enough, Rain carefully stepped out of the hallway, motioning for the others to wait another moment.

"No," Jamus said, shaking his head. "Stay focused, Carten. Check the floor before you step. And don't step on that symbol."

"Yeah, yeah," Carten said, taking another step forward, a little more gingerly this time. "S'just ice, Jamus." He looked back at Rain. "Nothin' here but that." He pointed at the shield on the floor. "You want I should step on it?"

Rain shook his head, then glanced back at the others. "Okay, I'm betting that the tunnel is going to seal itself once everyone comes in, so stay right there. Don't move."

"Oh, come on, Rain, let's just get on with it," Val said.

"No," Rain said, glancing at him. "Carten, Jamus, come on. Everyone back in the tunnel."

"What?" Carten said, standing up straight and abandoning his defensive posture. "Why?"

"I want to check if we can go back," Rain pointed. The far end of the tunnel didn't have a glowing symbol, but he didn't want to just dismiss it.

"Seriously, Rain?" said Val.

"Val, shut it," Rain said.

"Fine," Val said, walking down the tunnel. The others followed, Jamus dismissing his whip. When they reached the end, they found the wall blocking the former doorway to be just as solid as the walls to either side. There was no symbol anywhere, nor any way that they could see to return to the room where they'd started. Smashing the ice also proved ineffective. It broke easily enough, but as Rain had feared, it wasn't just a thin blockage. Short of mining all the way back up to the surface, they were stuck.

"Well, shit," Tahir said as Carten stepped away from the wall. There was a nervous edge to his voice as he laughed, looking at Rain. "There is going to be a way out, right?"

"There should be," Jamus said. "Back we go again."

The group poured out into the room. Once more, Rain had everyone except Carten and Jamus stay in the tunnel. He spotted his rock near his foot, then bent to pick it up and tossed it to Jamus. "Rock on the symbol."

Jamus nodded, then summoned his whip again and tossed the stone. Nothing happened.

"Carten, you next."

"Finally," Carten said. He tapped the symbol with an armored toe, and when nothing happened, walked directly onto it. "Huh."

"Everyone, get ready," Rain said. "Move out into the room."

Rain waited until last before he followed. The moment he left the doorway, there was a blast of cold air, and the wall closed up behind him seamlessly.

"Shit's glowin'," Carten said loudly, clanging his shields together as he stood over the now-lit symbol.

"Here we go," Mlem said, pointing with his sword to the far wall. As Rain watched, the ice shimmered, then vanished in a torrent of snowflakes, doubling the size of the room in an instant. As the snow settled, Rain saw a hulking creature headed slowly toward them, looking like nothing more than an iceberg carried by stubby dinosaur legs. There were what looked

like shards of bone sticking out of the ice. Rain blinked as a blue head suddenly peeked out from a hole in the front of the iceberg, the monster's name and level forming as it did so.

Ancient Icemont Turtle - Level 9

"Awesome!" Carten yelled, dashing for the monster, which was not-quite twice his height, the top of its iceberg-shell scraping against the ceiling. He planted himself in front of it, jamming his shields into the floor. "It's turtle time!"

"Really, Carten?" Jamus said, echoing Rain's thoughts. His lightning whip flicked into the turtle's side as he moved into position at Carten's elbow. "Hmm," he said, taking a step back.

"No damage," Rain said for the benefit of the unawakened. "From that, either." Val had just blasted it with a Solar Ray.

The monster reached Carten, snapping at him with its blue beak, making a loud clang as it struck his shield.

"Looks like we've got a tough one," Mlem said, stepping forward. His sword started to glow as he prepared to use Light Cut, the same skill he and Samson had used against the Memories. "Ha!" he shouted. He raised his scimitar above his head, then stepped forward and slashed down at the monster's leg. Before the blade struck, the turtle pulled back into its shell, dropping to the floor. There was a ring like metal-on-metal as Mlem's blade skittered off its icy armor.

"Damn," he said, stepping back. "Misaligned the edge. That or that ice is as hard as adamant. Samson, how good is your sword?"

"Let's see," Samson said. He waited for the turtle to get back to its feet, then stabbed at its leg, again using Light Cut. Once more, the turtle retreated. The point of Samson's longsword didn't even chip the monster's frozen shell. "No good," he said, stepping back. "I can't get through the shell."

Rain frowned, turning to Tahir and Lin and motioning them to stay back. There was no point in either of them putting themselves at risk, not without enchanted weapons. When he looked back, the turtle had gotten to its feet again. It plodded forward but was stopped in its tracks by Carten's Shield Bash. It clicked its beak in anger as it pulled its head back, then shook itself, sending flakes of ice falling from the ceiling.

"Jamus," Rain said. "Hit it with something stronger."

"Lightning Ball?" Jamus asked, moving to the side as Carten was pushed back by the turtle, his boots scrabbling for traction. Rain and the others stepped to the side, getting out of the way.

"No, not yet," Rain said. *That's AOE. We need better efficiency.* "Overcharged Arcane Bolt."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Jamus said, dismissing his whip. He set his feet and pointed his palm at the turtle, bracing his arm with his other hand. "Ten seconds for full charge."

"Damn floor!" Carten shouted. He grunted in frustration, his feet sliding further on the ice.

"Just hold on, Carten," Rain said, rushing up to join him. He planted his own feet, pushing against Carten's back.

The pale blue of the ice was quickly eclipsed by the purple-blue of Jamus's magic. He was circling behind the turtle, the Arcane Bolt hovering in front of his palm swelling larger as he

pumped more energy into it. Though Rain didn't know Jamus's exact skill-list, he could make some educated guesses. With Arcane Bolt at rank-thirteen, and with Arcane Mastery and Overcharge both at rank-ten, three thousand damage wasn't unreasonable. The turtle would have at least a few hundred damage resistance on its shell, judging by the attacks it had shrugged off so far.

"Here we go!" Jamus shouted. "HA!" Jamus slid back a few centimeters as he released the spell, his arm flying up from the recoil. The unstable-looking bolt didn't have far to go, almost immediately slamming into the monster's backside, detonating in a brilliant flash and a crack like thunder. In an instant, the turtle's health dropped by a tenth. There was a crash as a large chunk of ice broke off and smashed to the ground, followed almost immediately by the entire turtle, which had pulled back into its shell.

Only a tenth? Damn, this thing is tough for level nine. It's bosses. This lair is all bosses.

"Nice work, Jamus!" Carten yelled once the noise of falling ice died down. "Oh shit!"

The turtle sprung back to its feet, snapping its beak. Rain had the feeling that it would have been screaming with rage if it had the ability to do so. It locked its beady eyes onto Carten, snapped its beak once more, then *charged*, the ground shaking from the weight of its strides.

"Rebound!" Carten shouted. There was a red flash, and the turtle stopped as if it had crashed into a steel wall, though both Rain and Carten were shoved back, the skill overwhelmed by the force. Instead of pulling back inside its shell, the turtle went completely berserk, legs scrabbling against the ground as it picked itself up. It charged again, but so did Carten, preventing it from building up enough momentum to roll right over him.

Rain cursed and stumbled aside as Carten was once more pushed back. *I'm just in the way here. Better leave the turtling to the turtles.*

"Let's try this again," Samson said, skidding on the ice as he rushed around the turtle. He stabbed at the spot Jamus had hit, his sword glowing again as he plunged it through the crater in the monster's shell. From his new vantage point, Rain could see startlingly red blood seeping from the wound. Samson's strike proved effective this time, flaking off the barest sliver of the turtle's health. The swordsman hurriedly pushed himself away before he was crushed by the monster as it whirled to protect its weakened backside. The beast then spun again as Carten shield-checked it, his shield coming away red with its blood.

Okay, we've got this. If it bleeds, we can kill it.

There was a flash of light as Val took a shot, and the turtle's health dropped further. Jamus joined in, using unboosted bolts this time, launched from his other hand. He was opening and closing a fist with the arm he'd used to launch the Overcharged bolt, the mageburn clearly affecting him somehow. The turtle kept spinning to face the painful attacks, but each time, Carten would smack it again, forcing it to remain focused on him.

Between Jamus, Val, Samson, and Mlem, the party began to whittle the thing's health down steadily. Carten swore and spluttered the whole way through the fight, fighting for traction as the turtle tried to crush him over and over again. Fortunately for him, the monster lacked any significant offensive capability, other than its size. Its beak didn't seem to be strong enough to dent his Force Steel armor, let alone his shields.

As for Rain, he stayed back with Lyn and Tahir for most of the fight, simply using Force Ward to protect Mlem and Samson as they darted in for their attack runs. He tested Immolate once

but gave it up after a few seconds when it started melting the floor and making Carten's traction situation even more precarious. It hadn't even harmed the turtle in the slightest.

The only dicey moment was when Carten managed to get himself embedded in one of the walls. Jamus had then needed to use Arcane Bulwark to keep the turtle off the others, and the magical barrier was so large that it blocked everyone from attacking, and it could be neither moved nor dismissed. That had left the turtle free to use Carten's leg as a chew-toy for a few seconds until it ripped him from the wall. Carten had come up angry, but unharmed, protected by his armor, and a little help from Rain's Force Ward.

When all was said and done, the fight ended unceremoniously. The turtle collapsed with a heavy thud, the symbol on the floor vanishing as it did. After another moment, there was a gust of cold wind, and three tunnels appeared, leading into darkness.

"Damn it," Carten said, kicking at the dead turtle. "If I'dah had grip, ye'd never ah moved me."

"There there, Carten," Jamus said, patting him on the shoulder, still with his left arm. "We all know you're the best turtle there is." He raised his other arm, wincing as he shook out his hand. "I'm going to have pins and needles for hours."

Rain glanced at the lair display. Jamus had taken about two percent of his health in damage, just from that one spell. The lair's integrity, he saw, had dropped by eleven percent.

Acceptable.

"These are the same as before, Rain," Mlem said, pointing at the symbols on the ground.

"Sword, shield, and flame."

Rain nodded. It was clear enough what this part of the lair was going to entail. Eleven percent was a third of a third, meaning they were looking at two more fights like this one. His bet was that they'd get to a new area after that, just from the symmetry of three. It would also be wisest to stick with the shield path. *Better the turtle you know...*

He shook his head, listening to the crunching of Carten's boot as he continued taking out his frustration on the dead monster. Its shell was coming apart easily now, like regular ice. After a few more kicks, Carten threw his shields down in disgust, then stomped away, breathing heavily. Rain cleared his throat. "Good work, everyone. Let's take a short rest. It looks like I've got a turtle to melt."