

## 139: Agile

Staavo walked with confidence, following the packed-earth trail that ran along the edge of the crack. He was properly dressed for combat for the first time in longer than he cared to remember. His armor was made of Emouile leather, the material far tougher than cowhide but no less supple. The townsfolk were still busy tanning the hides of the monsters Ascension was providing them, but it was too soon for this armor to have come from one of those. It must have come from an Emouile they'd killed prior to Ascension's arrival. In the end, it didn't really matter. It wasn't enchanted, but it was a definite step up from the gambeson he'd been wearing. Wearing that thing had made him feel like a padded target dummy.

He grinned, accelerating to a light jog. Perhaps it was all the exercise he'd been getting, but he hadn't felt this good since he was a man twenty years younger. The familiar weight of his falchion tugged his hip with each step. That *was* enchanted, though only with durability. The sword was almost as old as he was.

Jamus looked up at his approach, straightening from where he'd been leaning against one of the wooden lift anchors. "Hey now, what's this I see?" he said, smiling. "Could it be that there's a *spring* in your step?"

Staavo laughed, coming to a halt. He shifted to one leg, then began to hop, bouncing on the curved piece of Force Steel that had replaced his wooden prosthetic.

"Whatever could you be referring to, Jamus?"

His new foot wasn't enchanted, but Tallheart had somehow forged the metal to be springier than any leaf spring while remaining strong enough to easily bear his weight. It was also

significantly lighter than his old foot had been, as it hadn't been shaped to resemble a real one or to fit inside a boot. It was a prosthetic meant for motion, not vanity.

Jamus snorted, watching him. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, but if you bounce yourself off the edge, that's your own fault."

"Ha," Staavo said, landing on both feet. He stumbled slightly but quickly recovered. "I feel like I can move again, Jamus. It might not be pretty, but damn if it doesn't let me hop about like a ligo in rut. I'm thinking I should just hack the other foot off to even myself out."

"Hmm," Jamus said, clearly skeptical. "I hope you thanked Tallheart for making it for you."

"Of course I did," Staavo snapped. "I was a jerk, he was a jerk, everybody was a jerk. We're better now. Water down the river."

"If you say so," Jamus said, gesturing to the lift. "Now come on. They're waiting for us down below."

Climbing onto the wooden lift platform, Staavo moved to help Jamus with the ropes, the two awakened making quick work of lowering themselves to the chasm floor.

In the past week, this section of the crack had been fortified much as the camp above. A tall earthen wall divided it from the rest of the chasm, and the lift descended down into the sheltered area. The wall was staffed with defenders only on days when missions were planned in the crack, as was the case here. The remainder of their team was watching them from atop it, along with a handful of unawakened archers that would be remaining here to guard the lift. To reach them, Staavo and Jamus would have to thread their way through a sizable herd of Crystal Slimes, which were presently clogging up the chasm floor.

"Been meaning to ask, Jamus," Staavo said as they walked through the passive creatures. "Are these for what I think they're for?"

"The slimes?" Jamus asked, raising an eyebrow.

Staavo nodded. "I'll miss Purify, sure enough, but I'd rather be damned to The Waste than take a bath in a slime."

Jamus scoffed. "I don't know about that. I'm sure Lix has worse tortures in his hell. You do have a point, though. Thinking of them eating the contents of chamber pots is bad enough." He tapped his chin. "I do wonder, though. Would they enjoy living in them? They do like tight spaces, after all. Could you make a"—he grinned—"bottomless commode?"

Staavo groaned. "A pun? Really?"

"Nice one, Jamus!" Carten yelled, grinning down at them from atop the wall like the enormous bearded child that he was.

"I, for one, am glad that Ameliah has been converting all of these," Jamus said to Staavo as he waved at Carten in greeting. "I have grown used to the cleanliness of the camp." He clicked his tongue, coming to a stop. Their way was blocked by a lone Greater Crystal Slime sitting on the bottom of the stairs. "I do wish they were a bit smarter, though. Come on! Move, you thoughtless blob!"

"Mmmhmm," Staavo agreed, only half listening. The sanitation problem was an engineering puzzle, to be sure.

*If we had access to a river, we could build the facilities Rain described. Running water, toilets, showers... We could even heat the water from the smelter.*

He shook his head as Jamus pushed at the slime, his hands sinking into it like it was an enormous pillow.

*Bah. I've been wiping my own ass for over seventy years. I'll survive.*

Jamus sighed, straightening and planting his hands on his hips. "It's ignoring me." He snorted. "Every time I am confronted with one of these, I find myself even more astonished by how smart Dozer was. It is a real shame what happened. At this point, I'm not sure that Rain is going to be able to revive him. It's over a week, and they'll be leaving any day now."

"Uh-huh," Staavo said, not really caring.

"Jus' push it harder!" Carten yelled down. "Give it a little kick!"

Staavo snorted, then moved to help Jamus. Together they managed to coax the barely-aware creature off the steps, though it took longer than it should have. Their way finally clear, they climbed to join the others.

In addition to Carten, their team for this mission included five other awakened: The flamboyant merchant, Mlem; Lyn Draves, the arena-fighting noblewoman; Tahir, the archer-turned-healer; Hanes, the actual archer; and Val, the Osaran fool who was supposedly the son of Lightbreaker.

*What an odd bunch.* Staavo chuckled to himself, ignoring looks this got him. *Reminds me of my glory days.*

"Is everyone ready?" Jamus asked. "We still have ten minutes until we agreed to start, but I see no need to delay now that we are all here."

"Yes, we're ready," Lyn said. "Let's get this damn thing."

"Getting a bit personal, eh?" Staavo asked, grinning at her.

"Depths, yes!" Lyn said, planting her staff hard on the top of the wall. "It's mocking us."

"Calm down, Lyn," said Hanes. "We don't even know if it's actually a monster that's taking the torches. It's not like anyone's been attacked."

"It's a monster, alright," Staavo said. "Fire Eater. No doubt about it."

"Oh?" Val asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "And you've fought one, have you?"

"No, but I know all the same," Staavo replied, narrowing his eyes. "I've been around, kid. Sadiir, Fel Sadanis, Xiugaaraa, hells, all over Bellost and Ekrustia, both. Too many cities to name. I've been doing this since before any of you were crawling, so you should listen when I talk."

Val snorted. "Kid, huh? Fine, old man. Glad to have you with us." He grinned. "What changed, anyway? You've never seemed interested in missions before. Aren't you supposed to be retired?"

"Maybe I got sick of watching children make a mess of the pie," Staavo said, grinning back.

"As amusing as all of this banter is, don't we have a job to do?" Mlem asked, gesturing over the edge of the wall.

"That's right," Lyn said. "Enough chit chat."

"How are we doing this?" Hanes asked.

"Carten is in the front with Lyn," Jamus said, straightening his hat. "Staavo and Mlem are both swordsmen, more or less, so they can watch the flanks. The rest of us will provide ranged support. The number one priority is to keep Tahir safe. Always protect the healer. That said, with both Carten and I here, I wouldn't expect any difficulties."

Hanes shook his head. "That's not what I meant, though I agree with the formation. I want to know how we're planning to lure it out."

"I have a few ideas," said Staavo, interrupting Jamus. "Firstly, I've got some magic juice, courtesy of our resident lunatics."

"Could you be more specific?" Lyn said.

"Myth and Reason," Staavo said with a grin.

"No, I got that," Lyn said, shaking her head, "though it's troubling that there could have been confusion on that part. I mean the magic juice. What's it supposed to do?"

Staavo raised his hands, wiggling his fingers mysteriously. "It will burn with the primal essence of the true flame."

"And that means...?" Mlem said, gesturing with an open hand.

Staavo snorted, lowering his hands. "Fuck-all. It's just more of their mystical tripe. From the smell, it's like the liquid used to make evertorches. I couldn't get them to explain what makes it different, other than that it burns hotter."

"Hopefully, it should attract the Fire Eater, regardless of how it was made," Jamus said. "We're authorized to go as far as the end of the second chasm, but I'd much prefer to lure it to us."

"Second chasm doesn't sound so bad, Jamus," Carten said. "I could use a little fun in the dark!"

"And I could use a damn Fire Eater scale hat," said Lyn.

Staavo snorted, then shook his head. "I've got another idea, too." He nodded at Val. "Just might be a bit dangerous for the invisible kid over there."

Val frowned. "If you mean having me lie in wait near a fire while the rest of you leave, I already thought of that. It's why I'm here, and I'm fine with it as long as the rest of you don't go far. I'm not getting any more of these today, thank you." He gestured to the scars adorning his face. "We still don't know what level it is."

"Wha?" Carten gasped, staring at Val like he'd grown a second head. "Caution? From you? Are ya sick?"

"Oh, shut up," Val said. "I'm not afraid of a little risk when there's something to be gained. That doesn't make me suicidal."

Jamus nodded. "We'll find a good spot to hide nearby when we try the fire liquid. We just need you to be our lookout. We still don't know how it extinguishes the flames."

Val shrugged. "Works for me."

"Me too," Lyn said. "Come on, let's go." Without waiting for confirmation, she walked to the edge and began descending one of the ropes hanging here.

Staavo quirked a smile. "Kids today. No patience."

Jamus sighed, rubbing at his eyes.

"Float me down, Jamus," Carten said.

"No, Carten, I'm not wasting the mana. You can use the ropes like everyone else. Or you could just jump. As long as you land on your head, you should remain undamaged."

Staavo chuckled, moving to the edge as the pair continued to argue. He swung his legs over and lowered himself hand over hand until he reached the chasm floor. Old instincts drove him to rise quickly from his crouch, scanning the surroundings for danger. He relaxed after a moment, seeing nothing moving by the dim light of the sun from above. There were a few torches burning at the base of the wall, pushing back the shadows. Lyn had moved further away down the crack, and seeing this, Staavo hurried after her. *Damn fool girl. You never go off on your own like that, even if everything looks safe. Always pairs of two unless you've got eyes in the back of your head or you're a damn silverplate.*

"It's around," Lyn said as he approached, removing her glove, then reaching into a niche in the chasm wall. "The stone is still warm."



Staavo came to a stop beside her, watching for danger and inspecting the niche with one eye. It had been hacked roughly into the stone, likely an attempt to protect a torch from the Fire Eater. Clearly, it hadn't worked. Either the Fire Eater's head was small enough to fit through the opening, or it was stealing the torches by some other means.

Staavo glanced back at the earthen fortifications, narrowing his eyes. The torches at the base weren't protected like this one, yet they hadn't been consumed. Neither had the ones atop it, near where the unawakened sentries were standing. "So, it doesn't like people, eh?" he said, rubbing at his goatee.

"Hmm?" Lyn asked, looking at him.

"The Fire Eater, girl." Staavo pointed. "It left those torches alone. Only thing that's different is the people."

The young noblewoman sighed. "It will get them eventually. It's only a matter of time. Look away for one second, and"—she snapped her fingers—"gone. Just like that."

"Has it ever left the chasm?" Mlem asked, approaching with the others. "We've lost a few torches in the camp."

"No," Lyn said. "Those were all mistakes. Some regular torches got mixed in with the evertorches in the storeroom. I had Reason check each one."

"You're really invested in this, aren't you?" said Val.

Lyn snorted. "Rain says it's my 'white whale', whatever that's supposed to mean. Is he from the coast?"

"No idea," said Tahir, shaking his head.

"Whatever," Lyn said, shrugging. She pointed with her staff and began walking. "Let's check the rest of them."

"Slow down, Lyn," Mlem said. "We should go in formation. There is no need to be reckless."

"It's safe enough at this time of day," Lyn said, slowing. "I've come down here more times than the rest of you combined, and I'm not going to wander off like a moron. It will be fine as long as everyone stays in sight of each other. Now come on."

"Who cleared it this morning, anyway?" Staavo asked. "Ameliah?"

"Rain, actually," Jamus said.

"Oh?" Val asked. "He crawled out of his hole for something other than a council meeting and I missed it?"

"He did," Mlem said, stroking his mustache. "He seems to be doing better these past few days. My gut says he's making some progress on his soul at last. Apart from that, his strength is finally beginning to feel appropriate for his level." He chuckled. "Those accolades have gone a long way. Obvious, given the value."

Jamus looked like he wanted to say something, but before he could, a scraping sound made everyone freeze.

"Sepulcher Ant," Lyn said, holding her staff at the ready. "Sounds like just one. Who wants it?"

"I've got this one," Staavo said, drawing his sword and stepping forward, warily scanning the bend in front of them. *No such thing as one ant.* "Stay back and let me handle it. I need to test out my new foot."

To his surprise, Jamus didn't object. Everyone in Ascension knew what he was capable of by now, more or less, yet they still treated him like he was old and infirm.

*Here we go.*

He raised his sword above his head into a single-handed high guard from Sparrow. His other hand, he pushed forward, defying the kata, which would have had him hold it out to the side. The ant clattered into view, rounding a bend in the chasm. The hair on Staavo's neck rose as the monster's aggression settled onto him. It was a sense familiar to any seasoned adventurer.

Staavo grinned. It made him feel alive.

The ant increased its pace, opening its grasping mandibles wide. He waited, motionless, hearing his companions shift behind him. The only thing to be worried about with Sepulcher Ants was the acid spit they used after being wounded. He wouldn't give it the chance. He held on just a moment more, then acted.

### **Ice Bolt**

With not even a wisp of frost for warning, the projectile flew straight between the ant's pincers, striking for its sensitive insides. Chasing the shard of ice, Staavo whirled to the side,

pivoting on his good foot as he followed the instinctive guidance of the kata. Simultaneously, he triggered the simplest skill in the Swordplay tree.

### **Slash**

There was no fancy effect to show that the skill had done anything, but the depth of the gouge left in the ant's neck was proof enough of its efficacy. Slash wasn't complicated. It simply enhanced any slicing motion. Sparrow, of course, was full of them.

### **Right Cut**

The weight vanished from Staavo's blade in the midst of the followthrough, and the sword burst alive with an even glow. Whipping his arm back and twisting his hand to bring the edge around, he struck the ant again, cutting even deeper along the same line. One of its mandibles fell away, sheared off neatly by the blade. A durability enchantment didn't boost damage, but for damn sure it helped keep a razor-sharp edge.

The ant staggered, its movements sluggish as it tried to turn after him. Ice Affinity had once more proven its worth. Thanks to the passive boost, the ten mana he'd spent on Ice Bolt would have dealt around two hundred Cold damage, easily enough to overcome the resistance of a level four creature. Combined with the two brutal sword strikes, it was almost dead, barely two seconds into the fight.

Kicking off with his new foot, Staavo dashed forward in a lunge, plunging his blade deep into the giant ant's compound eye. Unfortunately, the springy metal had launched him with more force than he'd expected. He overbalanced, crashing into the monster's side as the system's chime announced its death.

*Your group has defeated a level four Sepulcher Ant.  
Your contribution was ninety-nine percent.  
You are capped. No experience is granted.*

With agility born of long practice, he managed to ride the collapsing ant to the ground rather than crumple into an undignified heap. Quickly, he pushed himself back to his feet, pulling away from the rapidly growing mess that he'd made of his opponent.

*Damn foot*, he thought to himself, not for anything even *like* the first time. His muscles trembled as he reset his stance, and he clenched his jaw, forcing them to obey. *I hate being old.*

Abruptly, there was a sound. Scratches. He cocked his head, listening hard.

"Wow, okay," Lyn said. "Remind me not to piss off grandpa."

Staavo let himself relax, seeing that Jamus was looking in the correct direction. He straightened to face Lyn, smiling. "What about me gave you the impression that I'd ever want kids?"

There was a purple-blue flash from behind him, then a sound like a melon falling from a great height. Staavo grinned as Lyn jumped in surprise. "Nice work, apprentice," he said, looking over his shoulder. One Arcane Bolt had been all it took to finish the second ant, which had just come around the corner.

Staavo frowned, then coughed, removing a rag from his pouch. "Listen up, amateurs," he said, using it to wipe the ant brains from his sword. "Ants are pack monsters, even more so than wolves or spiders. When you see one, always be ready for more."

"I say let 'em come," Carten said, stomping toward the remains of the second ant. He clanged his shields together a few times in challenge, but nothing further rounded the bend.

*Only two? Huh.*

"We're not here to fight ants, Carten," Jamus said, laying a hand on Staavo's shoulder. "Nor are we here to give lectures. Come along, everyone. Let's get in formation and sweep through to the end. Once we have checked all of the torches, we can try Staavo's plan."

"What about this thing?" Mlem asked, nodding toward the nearer of the two ants. "Rule twenty-one."

"You and your rules," Lyn said, moving to take a position next to Carten. "No, we're not stopping to loot the bodies. One, yuck, and two, the bounty is worth more."

"Lyn is correct," Jamus said. "If we fail to lure it out, we can salvage what we can on the way back."

"Oh, very well," Mlem said, moving into position.

Staavo took his position, and the group began worming their way through the winding chasm. The only other monsters they ran into were slimes, which Hanes and Tahir shot from a safe olfactory distance with their bows. Discipline quickly waned, this being not nearly dangerous enough to deter conversation.

"So, Staavo," Hanes said after a particularly long bout of silence. "I know I don't know you that well, but... If you don't mind my asking, why did you take Ice Bolt?"

"Ain't it obvious?" Staavo said, raising an eyebrow. "Can't see the mountains when they're right in front of your face, kid?"

"There's no call to be rude," Jamus said.

"Bah," Staavo said. "Fine. I took it because I was an impatient dumbass."

Jamus sighed. "He took it after losing his foot, Hanes."

"Oh," Hanes said, wincing and looking away. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Staavo said. "I don't want your sympathy."

"It's always struck me as rather unfair that the system is so *final* when it comes to decisions," Mlem said. "Respec accolades notwithstanding. Did you ever consider purchasing one?"

"Yup," Staavo said. "Worked my way from Guild to Guild, saved up the money, packed my bags, and took a ship all the way to Mensis. Wasn't until I got there that I realized I didn't want a respec anymore."

"Mensis?" Tahir asked.

"Port city," Staavo said, waving a hand. "North side of Bellost. Not important."

"Why did you decide you didn't want one?" Lyn asked. "Rain says a focused build—"

"Rain says, huh?" Staavo interrupted. "Rain doesn't know shit. He's right, but he's just repeating what I told him." He jerked a thumb at his chest. "Yes, a focused build is stronger. If

I'd waited to get used to fighting on one leg, I could have maybe stuck with Swordplay and done better. Who knows. What I know is that Ice Bolt was enough for me to see the world. At fifteen, I wanted to be a legend. When I lost my foot, that dream died, and it took me five years to find a new one. I realized that my level was already more than enough for what I really wanted. I traveled, I fought, made friends, lost them, made more, then lost them again. Then I retired before something could kill me. Now, I sit around studying the markings of birds and yelling at clouds. There, life story told. Any other questions?"

"How did you lose your foot?" Val asked.

Staavo snorted, looking at him. "Dunch."

Everyone shuddered—including Jamus, who already knew the story.

"Gods, I hope I never meet—" Tahir began.

"Don't finish that sentence," Mlem said. "You know better than that."

"Well, there's the end," Carten said abruptly, cutting off the conversation as he gestured with a shield. "Unless I missed a huge flamin' dragon lizard thing somewhere, looks like it's time for the plan."

Staavo heaved an exasperated sigh, glaring at him. "It isn't a dragon. You can tell by how this isn't Ter'karmark, Vestvall isn't a smoldering pile of ash, and we're not dead."

Carten scoffed. "Not a *dragon*, dragon, obviously. Jamus, where're we doin' this thing?"



"Listen here, beef brain," Staavo snapped before Jamus could respond. "Dragons are dragons. Anything that's not a dragon isn't. Maybe our Fire Eater is a lizard, and maybe it even shoots sparks out of its arse, but that doesn't make it a dragon. You have no idea how much it bothers me when people like you ignore basic taxonomy."

"I do now," Carten said, grinning.

"Staavo," Jamus sighed. "Not this again, please. As amusing as it was when you had this conversation with Rain, this isn't the time for a reenactment."

Staavo turned to him. "Jamus, if we do not correct the children, how will they know how stupid they are?"

"Oi," Carten said.

Val sighed impatiently. "Carten, leave it. There's no point. Can we just get on with the mission?"

Staavo snorted, nodding at the Osaran mage. "For once, I agree with the kid. We shouldn't be screwing around like this." He flicked his fingers toward Jamus and Carten. "Even with those two here to guard our dumb asses, this ain't a pleasure stroll."

"Finally, we're all on the same page," Jamus said. "Come on. We'll try the lure near the mineshaft. The walls are nice and open there."

The group retraced its steps silently, soon reaching the wide-open area where Ascension had first encountered the Crimson Swords. The chasm floor was mostly level, though it slanted toward one end. It would make for a good arena, should they actually manage to attract the

beast. On one wall, a solid steel door sealed the entrance to the mineshaft. The old wooden one was lying flat on the ground nearby, smashed half to flinders.

Staavo pointed at it. "Look. Firewood."

Jamus nodded. "Okay, Hanes, Val, go get the door and bring it over here. Staavo, the juice?"

Staavo nodded, reaching into a pouch. He pulled out a mid-sized potion bottle filled with a clear liquid. He tossed it to Lyn without warning, laughing as the noblewoman's eyes widened. She dropped her staff and dove for it, but she fumbled the catch. The bottle fell to the stones with a heavy clunk.

"Damn it, Staavo," Jamus swore. "What if that had broken?"

"It's potion glass, Jamus," Staavo said, still smiling. "I helped make it. Myth and Reason might be good at alchemy, but they can't blow glass to save their lives. I'd never walk around with something that flammable in my pocket if the bottle was gonna break easily."

"Could have warned me, you ass," Lyn said, bending to retrieve the bottle before it rolled away.

Staavo waved a hand. "Sorry, sorry. Another free lesson for you kids: always bring your own bottles when you're visiting a chemist. Even if they say the glass is toughened, don't trust their word. Test it by throwing the potion at the floor, right there in the shop, ha!"

"There," Hanes said as he and Val arrived with the door, dropping it with a wooden thud.

"Now what?"

Lyn pointed at the metal door blocking the mineshaft. "Let's clear the tunnel, then everyone can hide in there while Val lights it."

"Good idea," Carten said. "Might be we find a good fight down there."

Lyn set the bottle down, and the group followed Carten over to the entrance to the mineshaft. The fight Carten was hoping for didn't happen. Upon undoing the chain and pulling open the metal door, they were greeted by the cheery light of a burning torch on the other side.

"Well," Lyn said, lowering her staff. "That's proof that it's out here with us, anyway."

"Damn it," Carten said, clanging his shields together, the sound echoing down the tunnel.

"Okay, everyone inside," Val said. "I'm going to go light the door. Anyone have a spark lighter?"

"Here," Mlem said, reaching into a pocket and tossing Val a silvery object.

"Thanks," Val said, snagging it out of the air. He walked over to the wooden door, then picked up the bottle and struggled with the metal clasp holding the cork in place. Once he had it free, he poured about half of the liquid out onto the door, then gave them the thumbs up and vanished. "I'll light it once you shut the door," he said, the air shimmering slightly as he spoke. "I can't stay invisible all day. I'll yell if it comes, or if the fire goes out."

"Make sure to stand back when you light it," Staavo said, the pungent smell of the alchemical concoction reaching his nostrils. "Toss a rag or something. I don't know how hot that shit's gonna burn, but if it's anything like Alchemist's fire, losing your eyebrows would be the best you could hope for."

"Duh," Val said as Lyn hauled the door closed.

Silence fell, everyone holding their breath. About thirty seconds later, there was a whump of ignition, audible even through the door, followed immediately by a blood-curdling scream. It wasn't, however, the noise of an idiot setting himself on fire. No human voice had made that noise, and further, it hadn't come through the door. Whatever it was was right on top of them.

A cloud of darkness appeared, and the torch was snuffed out.

"Shit!" Carten yelled. There was a metallic clang, then another, and then Staavo felt claws digging into his shoulder, even through the leather armor. Before he could yell, the monster was gone, pushing off from him with considerable force. There was another metallic thunk as it struck the door, then a screeching of claws on metal as it began attacking the barrier.

Staavo clasped a hand to his shoulder, not feeling any blood. *Hells. It must have followed us in when we opened the door. Stealthy? Fah. Try fucking invisible.*

He stumbled back in the darkness and bumped into someone. Pushing them away, he carefully slid his sword free of its sheathe, then activated Light Cut. He didn't swing the blade, instead focusing on holding the skill at the ready for as long as possible. By the glow, he finally got a look at the menace that had been plaguing them.

### Fire Cater - Level Thirteen

He barely even noticed the system-given name as the monster whirled, hissing at the light with rage filling its beady black eyes. It was small for a monster, about twice as large as a house cat, covered in sleek black fur rather than the scales he'd been expecting. Its body was

long and low, and it had a rat-like face and a short, stubby tail. That was all he managed to see before his skill ended and the light winked out, but it was enough for him to recognize the creature.

*Gods! A cat snake! They do exist!*

"Ahhhhhh!" Lyn yelled, and there was the sound of wood striking metal amid the continued scratching of the fire-eater's claws.

"Lyn, get back!" Jamus yelled. "Staavo! More light!"

Wordlessly, Staavo obeyed, activating his skill again just in time to see the tip of Lyn's staff slam heavily into the creature's back. This didn't seem to do much to it, other than to make it squeak in outrage as it continued its assault on the door. The light failed again, and before he could use Light Cut a third time, a blueish light filled the tunnel. It was faint, but enough to see by, coming from a glowing stone that Mlem was holding over his head.

"I've got it," the merchant said.

"Carten, get up there!" Jamus said, the tunnel momentarily brightening as he launched an Arcane Bolt. He cursed as the magic swerved, drawn into the metal door.

"Damn! Fucking! Thing! Worthless! Fire! Eating! Rat!" Lyn had her staff in a two-handed grip and was jabbing at the Fire Eater with each word like she was spearfishing. Her strikes either missed or did nothing but shave off the tiniest slivers of health. The monster had some level of Force resistance, clearly, though not enough to save it from Carten. The big man muscled his way past Staavo, then slammed the edge of his shield viciously into the Fire Eater, making it squeak in pain.

"Ha!" he yelled, raising the shield again, but the Fire Eater moved like smoke. Literally. Staavo lost track of it as it dissipated in the dim light.

"Shit," Hanes yelled. "Where did it go?"

"It's on me!" Carten yelled. "Gah! Get off me neck!"

There was a clang of metal on metal, then a thud as Carten crashed into the door. It sprang open, falling off its hinges and flooding the tunnel with daylight. Carten stumbled out, almost flattening Val, who'd been hammering on the other side.

The Fire Eater keened with rage as it rushed for the blazing wooden door, moving as a shadowy blur. Upon reaching the flames, it exploded into a literal cloud of rolling smoke, which descended upon the burning wood, smothering it in darkness. Moments later, the cloud cleared, leaving the Fire Eater standing there alone. The flames were gone entirely, as was the door. The cat snake hopped about furtively, writhing through the air as it looked in every direction. Once it seemed satisfied that the fire was completely gone, its beady gaze returned to the party. It took a step back, then hissed, its fur puffing up in outrage.

"That's the Fire Eater!?" Val said, incredulous.

"Dark Aspect!" Staavo snapped, pointing. "Stop staring and get your orb on it before it turns to smoke again!"

"Looks like a thin Darkmonk," Val said, summoning his light and sending it whizzing toward the monster.

"I have no idea what that is," Staavo said. He smiled as the Fire Eater hissed at the light, slashing at it with its claws ineffectually. Wisps of smoke formed around it, and its outrage became even louder as it failed to vanish. *As I thought.* He clapped Val on the back. "Keep that damn orb on it, whatever else you do."

"Everyone out so I can block the tunnel!" Jamus commanded. "Don't let it get away!"

"C'mere, rat!" Carten yelled, rushing at the Fire Eater. It dodged around him with contemptuous ease, Val's Lunar Orb hot on the chase. The monster had much more difficulty avoiding Lyn, however. Her staff was a blur as she swept it in wide arcs, pushing the creature back. Purple-Blue light flashed as Jamus raised an Arcane Bulwark to block off the mineshaft.

"I'm using a Seeker Shot!" Hanes shouted. "Don't move, Lyn!" There was a thwip of a bowstring, and the Fire Eater squeaked as an arrow punched into its side. The agile monster had attempted a dodge, but the skill-guided arrow had found it anyway. The hit did some damage, but the arrow didn't break the monster's skin.

Hanes's arrow was followed by another, this one from Tahir. The healer didn't have any archery skills, but he was still a good shot. This time when the monster dodged, it did so much more vigorously, leaping high into the air, likely anticipating another homing missile.

Staavo quirked a smile. *Mistake. **Ice Bolt.***

The best time to strike an agile monster was when it was in mid-air and couldn't dodge.

Apparently, the other mages agreed. Val's Solar Ray struck first, followed swiftly by Staavo's icy shard, and then by Jamus's slow-moving Arcane Bolt. The three hits together took a nasty bite out of the Fire Eater's health, though not as much as Staavo expected. Jamus's hit, in

particular, didn't appear to have done much, despite how much more powerful it should have been.

"It's Arcane resistant!" Staavo yelled out as the creature landed. He clicked his tongue, watching it dart away. Ice Bolt had done damage, but the slow didn't seem to have had an effect.

"Shit!" Hanes swore, loosing another arrow as the cat snake charged him. His panicked shot missed, and he screamed as the monster's needle-like teeth sank into his arm. He dropped his bow, then began punching the Fire Eater with his other hand. The monster ignored the feeble hits, keeping a bloody grip on the archer's arm as it began shredding his gambeson with its claws.

Fortunately, Mlem was already on his way, and the merchant's scimitar proved much more effective in dislodging the Fire Eater. His strike carved a bloody line into its hide, and it howled in agony as it released Hanes's arm. It darted away, and Carten tried to stomp it as it ran past him. His armored boot missed with a heavy thump, followed by a curse. Meanwhile, Tahir had reached Hanes, grabbing the other man's shredded arm to use Healing Word. That was good, but it did mean that both of their archers would be out of the fight for a little while.

"Watch out!" Jamus shouted, but his warning proved unnecessary. Val had already summoned a pane of light before the first word had left Jamus's mouth. The translucent barrier stopped the Fire Eater's lunge for his neck as if it were made of brick. There was a sizzling sound as the monster ricocheted away, and it took Staavo a moment to realize that it was its Dark-aspect blood reacting with the opposing element of the shield. He tracked it with his arm, then cursed as Carten got in the way just as he was about to launch his magic.



Dodging Carten yet again, the Fire Eater went for Lyn next. The noblewoman was ready, and she whipped her staff in a graceful arc, catching it in the ribs and sending it tumbling. It managed to regain its footing just in time to dodge another Arcane Bolt from Jamus, but Val nailed it with a Solar Ray moments later. The Light-aspect spell was instantaneous, and the Fire Eater clearly had no resistance, perhaps even a vulnerability. Its health was getting quite low now.

Wisps of black smoke formed around it again, and it screamed in frustration at the Lunar Orb, which was still chasing after it like an enormous firefly. Its magic thwarted, it scampered away by more physical means, slipping through Carten's legs as it made for the narrower section of the crack to the north. Apparently, that last hit had been enough for it to decide that it was done with this fight.

"GODS DAMN IT!" Carten swore, spinning to charge after it. Staavo snorted, amused, launching another Ice Bolt. His amusement turned to shared annoyance as the Fire Eater swerved out of the way.

"Kill it before it gets away!" Lyn screamed, chasing after Carten. Amazingly, it looked like the armored turtle was the faster runner of the two. Staavo didn't even bother trying to follow. New foot or not, he'd never be able to catch up.

With a sudden pop, Mlem appeared from nowhere, directly in the monster's path. Staavo blinked. He'd clearly missed the flight of the Skipping Stone in the chaos.

The Fire Eater's claws skittered across the stones as it tried to arrest its momentum, succeeding only to be immediately blindsided by a vicious Shield Bash.

"TAKE THAT, YA SHIT!" Carten bellowed triumphantly as the monster soared through the air. It struck the chasm wall with a wet thump, leaving a smear of dark blood as it began to fall. Staavo aimed quickly, loosing an Ice Bolt for where he predicted it would land. His magic struck true, the frozen shard punching deep into the injured creature before shattering. Lyn arrived moments later, bringing her staff down with both hands on the Fire Eater's back. There was a crunch of breaking bone, and its health bar, already almost empty, flickered out of existence.

*Your group has defeated a level thirteen Fire Eater.  
Your contribution was eighteen percent.  
You are capped. No experience is granted.*

Lyn screamed in wordless triumph, and Staavo smiled, glancing at Hanes in time to see the archer relaxing the tension from his bow. There was blood on his sleeve and his armor was shredded, but there was no pain in his expression. Tahir was standing nearby, looking unconcerned, having reclaimed his bow as well. Staavo's smile widened, and he rolled his neck as he slipped his sword back into its sheath.

*Eh. Not bad. For a bunch of kids.*