

## 41: Maze

“Little Mouse! To me! Everyone, brace!” Carten shouted, his voice controlled despite the volume. Rain snapped out of his panic, stepping up next to Carten in the tunnel and activating his Velocity aura. They’d come up with a plan for how to use Rain’s skills in combat during their experimentation earlier. The group had even gone as far as to do some drills.

He used Channel Mastery and IFF to give Carten a 100% boost to speed while limiting everyone else to 60%, including the Dark Hounds. As the lead hound came into range of the aura, it gave a startled yelp and its eyes disappeared. It must have stumbled; however, he still couldn’t see anything but their glowing eyes outside the pool of light from the two Lunar Orbs. He hadn’t extended the Velocity aura, but it still reached well out into the darkness.

Carten roared and banged his shields together with a resounding crash, his enhanced speed allowing him to move them with incredible velocity. Jamus and Val had started firing down the other tunnel somewhere behind them. The irregular strobe of white light revealed the outline of the hounds charging towards them in stop-motion flashes. More hounds stumbled as they crossed the invisible perimeter of the aura, but Rain could see that they were getting back to their feet and resuming their approach.

He gripped his staff and stood slightly behind Carten, preparing to intercept any of the hounds that managed to make it past the huge man. The first hound bounded into the light, its dark body twisted and unnaturally lean. It leapt, teeth grasping for Carten’s face. Carten blurred as he stepped forward to meet it, slamming it into a wall with a massive backhand from one of his shields. There was a horrible crunching noise and black blood splattered against the wall.

There was no time to celebrate; the rest of the hounds were already upon them. They showed no caution, lunging for the big man, heedless of the fate that had just met their fellow. Carten fended them off calmly, using his shields to force them back and smashing them into the walls and the ceiling whenever he had an opening. One of the hounds growled and started towards Rain, edging around the tumultuous brawl.

Rain brought his staff down on the hound’s head with all of his might, not trying to hold back his movements, boosted as they were by the Velocity aura. His staff whipped through the air, connecting with the hound’s skull with a mighty thump and smashing it into the ground. It lay there stunned until Carten stomped on it, snapping its spine with an audible crack.

“Nice one, Little Mouse!”

“I think it’s working!” Rain shouted. “They can’t deal with the speed!”

“I can barely deal with the speed!” Jamus said from somewhere behind him. “But don’t stop. It looks worse for them than it is for us! Val, move the shield, this is going to be a big one!”

There was a crack of thunder and a dim blue flash, but Rain had no time to see what had caused it as another of the hounds had slipped past Carten and was lunging for his face. He swung his staff sideways like a bat, clipping it on the jaw and sending it sprawling into the wall. It got up with a growl and stalked toward him, dark blood and saliva dripping from its bared fangs.

Carten had moved out of range, consumed by his own battle with the hounds. Rain was on his own. He shouted and swung again at the hound, but it dodged back, then lunged, latching on to his arm with its teeth. Rain dropped his staff and punched at the hound's head with his other hand, yelling incoherently. The chain covering his arm prevented the monster's fangs from penetrating his arm, but he felt a terrible pressure as if his bones were going to snap.

Giving up his ineffectual punches, he dug in with his fingers, jamming his thumb into the hound's flaming red eye. It released him with a yelp of pain and he kicked at it, sending it scuttling back. Carten was completely outside the range of the light at this point, only the continuing thunder of his voice and the snapping of bones to indicate that he was still fighting.

The hound facing Rain bared its fangs in a snarl, one of its eyes ruined and leaking gore down its face. It approached him cautiously this time, favoring its left side.

"Here," Ameliah said, stepping up next to him and holding out his staff. He hadn't seen her move to pick it up, but there she was. Rain quickly grabbed the staff, wincing at the pain in his forearm. He swung it at the hound, this time not overextending, focusing on keeping it at bay. The flashes behind him suddenly stopped.

"Clear!" he heard Val shout into the darkness.

"A few left!" Carten's voice boomed. "Give me a minute!" This was followed by another massive crash and a howl of pain. The wounded hound lunged at Rain again and he blocked it with the staff, its fangs biting deep into the wood instead of his throat.

"Finish it," Ameliah said as the hound released the wood and backed off, preparing itself for another lunge. "Swing from its blind side."

Following her instruction, the next time the hound leapt, Rain abandoned defense and went for the kill, whipping the staff towards the monster's ruined eye and connecting with a crunch of shattering bone. The staff jumped out of his hands. Fortunately, the Dark Hound didn't look like it was going to be getting up any time soon.

"Not bad," Val said, laying a hand on Rain's shoulder. "You can stop with the Velocity now. I'm starting to feel dizzy."

"Carten! You need any assistance?" Jamus called.

"Die you mangy shitbag!" There was a last wet-sounding crunch from the darkness, the tunnel falling silent as the last of the hounds met its end. Carten's footsteps echoed as he stepped back into the light. "Nope, I'm good," he said, shaking one of his shields to dislodge a pulped mass of gore that was clinging to it.

Rain panted in relief, switching to his Detection aura and scanning for more Dark Hounds. There was nothing, even at maximum intensity. They'd won.

"Everyone okay?" Val asked. Rain looked at him in the pale light. He appeared to be completely unscathed. Glancing at his interface, he saw that Jamus and Val were both running a little low on mana, but were otherwise fine. Carten was down a chunk of stamina, but his health hadn't budged. His own

mana was dangerously low. He'd already been lower than he should have been when the fight had started due to how much he'd been using Detection.

"I'm...fine," he managed, fighting off the adrenalin. "Just need to recover my mana."

"You gonna' do somethin' about this mess?" Carten asked, wiping ineffectually at the blood covering his shields.

"I've got it," Ameliah said. "Rain, use Winter. We don't know how long we have until more come. Look at the lair's status."

Rain looked at the window he'd placed in the bottom left of his view. The blue background automatically faded back in as it received his attention.

Everdeep Fortress

Rank 5

92%

"It went down," he said, blinking at the number. He slumped down against the wall and closed his eyes, activating Winter. "I'm...gonna need a minute."

"It's ok, Rain, you did well," Ameliah said.

"Come on, Rain, this was hardly worse than the Kin," Val laughed. "Jamus and I got some good target practice in."

"I'm fine, guys," Rain waved them off. "Just tired. It felt so much more...real. The fight with the Kin was less...physical."

"Enjoy it while you can, Little Mouse! Once you've got that IFF thing maxed, a fight like this would be boring! Ha, they couldn't keep up with me at all!"

"They *were* faster, though," Jamus said. "You were right, Rain, the Velocity aura affected them."

"Is that absolute?" Val asked. "If he gets IFF to max, can he just exempt us and keep switching it around to screw with them? It's really hard to deal with the sudden changes."

"Nothing is absolute," Ameliah said. She was in the process of using Purify to dissolve the corpses of the Dark Hounds.

"What resistance, then? Not Dark, clearly," Val said.

"Arcane," Carten said. "Non-specific magical bullshit is always Arcane."

"You're not wrong," Jamus laughed with a smile. "I got a level from this. I've got some interesting options available."

"Grats, Jamus. How many did we kill? I lost count," Carten said.

“One moment,” Jamus said, consulting his interface. “Thirty-seven Dark Hounds, ranging from levels three to six. No blues.”

“That few?” Carten said. “Seemed like more.”

Rain took a deep, steadying breath, letting the voices of his companions wash over him. His heart was finally starting to slow down as Ameliah finished evaporating the Dark Hounds. She sent her light down the tunnel, drawing Tel to her hand as the light revealed them. Whatever skill she was using, it seemed she needed to be able to see the Tel for it to work. He’d looked through his menus earlier, but he hadn’t seen anything with the name ‘attract’ in any of the skill trees he’d checked.

He paged through his own notifications, confirming the kill count Jamus had stated. Interestingly, he only had non-zero contribution listed for two of them, one at 100% and the other at 67%. Apparently, only damage dealt counted within a lair. His Velocity aura hadn’t earned him any credit.

*Why are the rules different in here?*

“Rain, the bag?” Ameliah said, holding out her hand. She opened it to reveal a small pile of Tel, as well as a slightly larger black crystal. Rain fumbled for the bag, retrieving it from his belt and passing it to her. She added the crystals to the bag and tossed it back to him. “Sixty-eight Tel and a Dark Cryst,” she said.

“Not bad,” Carten said. “How long till you’re ready, Rain?”

“A little under an hour if I use Aura Focus. Keep me safe?”

“Of course,” Val said. He nodded to Ameliah. “I apologize. You were right about the lair. Without Rain, we’d be in quite a bit of trouble. The monsters aren’t strong, but without the ability to recover mana...”

“We’d be in quite a fix, that’s for sure,” Jamus said. “Go on, Rain. We’ll be right here.”

“Stay quiet,” Ameliah said, reducing the intensity of her orb. “We’ll warn you if something comes.”

Rain nodded. “Just wave my arms around or something. I won’t be able to hear you at all.”

“I know,” Ameliah said with a half smile. “Staying like that for hours...I don’t know if I could handle that. It isn’t much fun, is it?”

“No, it really isn’t,” Rain said. The world faded away as he activated Aura Focus, trusting his companions to protect him against the horrors of the lair.

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“Fuckin’ damn it!” There was a resounding crash as Carten slammed both of his shields into the wall with all of his strength. He drew back, revealing the dark bricks to be totally unharmed. He slammed it again with an incoherent growl of rage.

“That won’t help, Carten,” Jamus said.

“We’ve been down ‘ere for days, and we’re still stuck in this depths-cursed maze!”

Rain sighed as Carten continued venting his frustration against the wall. He was feeling it too. After they had recovered from the first fight with the Dark Hounds, the party had started walking again. Now, they were hopelessly lost. It wasn’t that the labyrinth was complicated or anything, it was that the tunnels kept shifting on them. They had tried everything, taking only lefts, taking only rights, alternating lefts and rights, even doubling back every time they reached an intersection. Nothing had worked. Carten was exaggerating about how long it had been, but it had to be night on the surface by now. It was impossible to tell down here.

Rain’s Clarity-boosted memory was filled with a snarled tangle of twists and turns. There was no discernible pattern to the madness, and the non-Euclidean geometry of their path through the lair was making his head hurt the longer he tried to think about it. At least they hadn’t run into any more ambushes along the way.

They had encountered plenty more Dark Hounds, but they had been in much smaller groups, no larger than five or six at a time. Jamus and Val had been able to deal with them without any trouble, killing them easily before they even reached Carten’s one-man shield wall. Rain had been using Essence Well, but though everyone’s mana was full, their patience was in short supply.

There was another loud crash as Carten headbutted the wall as hard as he could.

“You’re not going to be able to break the wall,” Ameliah said. “Stop that before you hurt yourself.”

“Let’s camp here for today,” Jamus said, yawning. “I think we could all use some rest.”

Carten threw his shields down in disgust, pulling off his helmet and throwing it against the wall to land in a clatter.

“Watch in pairs,” Ameliah said. “Eat something before you sleep. I brought extra rations if anyone needs any.”

Rain sighed as he slumped down against the wall. “I’ve got plenty, unfortunately.” He dug in his pack, pulling out a ration bar and gnawing on it tiredly. He pulled up his interface to review their progress so far. They’d killed over a hundred Dark Hounds, but other than the two from their first fight, he’d had little to do with it as far as the system was concerned. “Hey Val, can you move that light over here?” he asked, pouring out the contents of the loot bag. He pawed through the small pile of crystals, counting out 396 Tel and two Dark Crysts.

Carten seemed to recover slightly at the sight of the small pile of crystals. “What’s the count?” he asked.

“Almost four hundred, plus two Dark Crysts,” Rain said, sweeping the pile back up into the sack.

“Well, at least we’ve got something to show for all this,” Carten said, chewing on his own ration bar. It sounded like he was crushing rocks in his mouth, the stony ration no match for his Endurance-boosted teeth. “Won’t do us much good if we can never get out.” He took a flask from his pack and Rain detected the tang of strong alcohol as he took a swig. He offered it to Rain, but he politely declined.

Carten tucked the flask away and lay down with a clatter of metal. "Someone else can have first watch. Wake me up if there's anything worth killing."

"Don't worry Carten, we'll get out. There's always a trick to these things," Jamus said. "I'll take first watch."

"I'll join you," Rain volunteered.

"I guess I'll try to get some sleep then," Val said, lying down next to Carten. He sent his light to hover over Rain's head. "Kick me if that goes out."

"What about you?" Rain asked, looking at Ameliah.

"I'll take the next watch," she said, sitting cross-legged against the opposite wall. "Don't worry, I'm a light sleeper." She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall.

Jamus nodded to Rain in the dim light. "I'll watch this way. You take the other side. Stay sharp, we don't know that Dark Hounds are all that's down here."

"Yeah," Rain said, peering out into the darkness. He sat himself down to watch, staff across his knees. "Hey Val, can you move the light out a little bit?"

"Sure, tell me when," Val said, not opening his eyes. The orb started to move, bumping against one of the walls, then following along it.

"There, that's far enough," Rain said. "Left a bit, so it's in the middle. Good, stop."

The light from the two orbs was steady as silence returned to the tunnel. Rain stared at the glowing orb hovering up near the ceiling.

*Humm...I wonder...*

Rain sighed and rubbed at his eyes. This was going to be a long night.