43: Fall

"So what are we looking at?" Jamus whispered. "I can't see a thing."

"Not sure. Looks like there's some sort of bridge ahead," Val replied. "Hold on, I'm going to resummon my light."

"Wait," Jamus said. "We don't know for sure we're out of the maze. Just because this cave looks different, it doesn't mean it isn't going to shift on us."

"Ok. Ameliah, can you send yours in, then?" Val asked.

"Too dangerous," she whispered. "There's something on the other side, or maybe at the bottom. I can't tell with all the echos. I don't want to leave us in the dark until we know what it is."

"I don't hear nothing," Carten said.

"Rain, can you sense it?" Ameliah asked.

Rain shook his head. "Whatever it is, it's out of range of Detection. I might be able to check out the chasm though. Hang on.

He switched his skill over from 'monsters' to 'stone' and released a pulse. As he expected, he came up with nothing. He'd tried this before back in the maze, but it appeared that whatever the tunnels were made of, it wasn't simply rock. He suspected that 'mundane materials' didn't include the walls of a lair. He'd tried other things, such as 'dirt' and 'metal', but he hadn't been able to see through the earth as he had in the mine.

Ok, if I can't see the walls, I'll try looking for something that isn't a wall.

Rain switched his skill once more, this time setting his focus to 'air'. Immediately, his sensorium whited out, his brain overloaded by the quantity of information being fed into it. He made a stricken gurgle and started to topple. Ameliah caught him and guided him gently to the ground. He reflexively released the skill, but it took him a few minutes of recovery before he could separate the concerned voices of his companions from the jumbled sea of crunchy lavender that had filled his hearing.

"I'm okay, guys," he managed, slurring his words slightly.

Well, that was different. I never thought I'd hear a texture or see a flavor. Lesson learned: no full-power detection on air unless I want to taste the rainbow.

"What happened?" Ameliah said softly, concern in her voice.

"I tried to use Detection on the air, but there was too much… I could feel every single air current, just for a second, before my senses... I couldn't handle that much information, and it kind of broke my brain."

"I can imagine," Jamus said. "Any lasting damage?"

"I don't think so. I'm back to normal, more or less. Ok, I'm trying again…just with much lower power this time."

"Be careful," Ameliah said. He smiled, then closed his eyes. He activated Detection with Aura Focus and Extend Aura to increase the range to maximum, but also used Channel Mastery to drop the mana usage to nothing. He called up the skill's description as he did so.

> **Detection (9/10)** Exp: 4215/7400
> Sense selected items of interest
> Not occluded by mundane materials
> Resolution: 1.00 meters
> Range: 75.5 meters
> Cost: 0 mp/s

Huh. No mana cost and a 75-meter range, but the resolution is still 1 meter? I can't feel anything though… There must be a hidden 'sensitivity' stat or something. Damn it all. More dialogs to customize later.

Still, I guess that explains why boosting the power helped me lock onto the Dark Hounds. Resolution doesn't really have anything to do with their ability to block the skill. I guess I'm going by feel here. Let's try 1%.

Rain concentrated, slowly increasing the power that he was feeding into the skill. Though Channel Mastery let him freely vary the intensity of his magic, it did seem to like sticking to even percentages. It somehow felt like there were grooves that the skill liked to settle in, evenly spaced along a sloping incline.

> **Detection (9/10)** Exp: 4215/7400
> Sense selected items of interest
> Not occluded by mundane materials
> Resolution: 0.94 meters
> Range: 75.5 meters
> Cost: 2.43 mp/s

Ok, not much change to the resolution, and I'm not getting any synesthesia. Can't feel much of anything, though. Humm.

Temporarily switching his focus to 'humans', Rain confirmed that the skill was still working. He could feel the vague sense of his companions around him, even at 1% intensity. He lowered the intensity back to 0, and the signals disappeared.

Interesting. I guess some things are easier to find than others? Air must be difficult. Maybe because it's a gas? Something to do with density? Anyway, it's good to know I can use the skill at a low level and still find people with it. I'll experiment with it later. For now…

Rain switched his focus back to air and slowly ramped up the intensity, struggling to keep the rate of increase steady as he pushed the skill up out of each groove and into the next. At around 5%, he started to feel something pressing in on him. By 10%, his brain was screaming for mercy. He was intimately aware of the air around him in a massive volume. He quickly checked the skill description.

Detection (9/10) Exp: 4215/7400
Sense selected items of interest
Not occluded by mundane materials
Resolution: 0.36 meters
Range: 75.5 meters
Cost: 24.3 mp/s

Owww, this is about my limit. It'll have to be good enough. I don't know that I can hold this for long.

Rain started to speak. The sensation of forming words while using Aura Focus was almost as bizarre as the signals coming in from Detection. He couldn't hear his voice through his ears, only an odd sort-of vibration as the air moved through his lungs. He soldiered on, hoping that he was at least somewhat intelligible and that he wasn't speaking too loudly.

"Ok, this is really weird, but I think it's working. Sorry if I sound like I'm drunk or something. I can feel the air all around us. It feels like…never mind, I can't really explain. What's important is, I can feel where the air *isn't*. There's some sort of bridge leading out across the chasm in front of us. The other side feels like the inside of a sphere, so I think I'm hitting the max range. The bridge is about a meter across, maybe a bit wider. I can't tell what's holding it up. It's gotta be some magical bullshit… Ooph, hang on, sorry, this is really…Ah… The…bottom is about fifty meters down, maybe. I can't feel much down there, but it's flat enough. I can't feel the ceiling. What else… Ugh, this is getting harder… I think I can kinda tell where you guys are. You feel like…holes in the air. No, don't move. That makes it worse. I can barely keep track of all this without you making wind. Stand still! Argh!"

Rain dropped the skill and brought his hands up to his temples. It felt like someone had clamped his head in a vice, only from every direction.

"Ow," he moaned.

"Did you get any of that?" Jamus asked, looking at the others.

"I think he said somethin' about a bridge," Carten said. "Then somethin' about a bull shittin'? I'm pretty sure I heard that bit wrong."

"Sorry, Rain, could you explain that again?" Val said. "That was practically unintelligible by the end."

"I was afraid of that," Rain said. He quickly summarized his findings, fighting the slowly fading pressure on his mind. He'd spent quite a bit of mana, but Winter was replenishing it, the feeling of cold soothing his overstressed brain. He finished his summary, then fell silent, still rubbing at his temples.

Val spoke first. "So a chasm with a narrow bridge. No monsters that he felt, but that doesn't mean there aren't any. I'm thinking bats."

"I agree. Giant freakin' bats," Carten said.

"It's possible," Jamus said. "So far, all we've seen are Dark Hounds, but the terrain does seem to suggest a flying monster type."

"What about the slimes?" Val asked.

"Those weren't in the lair," Carten pointed out. "Uh, wait, does that matter?" he asked, looking at Ameliah.

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter that they were outside. They spawned from the overflow. We may find more of them."

"So, what do we do?" Rain asked, getting back to his feet unsteadily.

"We cross," Jamus said. "Not much choice, unless we want to go back through the maze."

"No way we're going backward," Val said. "Carten, go on, you're first."

"No," Ameliah said, firmly.

"Why not?" Carten asked. "I'm the turtle, it's my thing."

Ameliah shook her head. "No, not that. Crossing in general. Fighting on that bridge would be stupid."

"What then?" Val said. "Draw them to us somehow?"

"Yes," she said with a nod. "I'll send my light up. We keep back from the ledge and deal with any monsters that come. Fall back into the tunnel if they swarm us. Only once they're dealt with do we cross."

"Ah, yes. I was about to suggest that" Jamus said. "I didn't mean we should cross immediately."

"Wait for Rain's mana," Ameliah said. "Velocity will be devastating on fliers."

The group waited quietly for the ten minutes or so it took for Rain to regenerate more mana than an average person did in a week. When his senses returned, they moved carefully to the edge of the chasm. Ameliah's light revealed that the tunnel ended in a sudden cliff. The narrow stone bridge that Rain had felt jutted out into the darkness.

The adventures readied themselves and Ameliah wordlessly sent her light out into the chasm. Val had resummoned his own light at some point, apparently having decided that the second light was worth the cost of losing their previously marked position.

Ameliah's orb traveled along the bridge, eventually reaching the other side without incident. The light revealed another tunnel set into the wall of the chasm, far in the distance. There were no monsters on the far side, so Ameliah brought the light back until it was in the center of the bridge, then sent it up.

Rain took a hesitant step toward the edge of the cliff so he could track the progress of the orb without the ceiling of the tunnel blocking his line of sight. When the light reached the ceiling of the chasm, he

saw that it was covered with enormous stalactites, massive in comparison to the tiny Lunar Orb. Suddenly, there was an ear-rending screech and something huge and shadowy detached itself from one of the stalactites. It fell, Ameliah's orb following it as it unfurled a massive set of leathery wings.

There was a flash of white light and the monster screamed again, this time in pain. Val had blasted it and was in the process of lining up another shot. "Don't fire, Jamus, not until it gets close enough for us to be sure it's not a blue. If it is, just run. I'll handle it." There was another flash of light and the creature screamed again. It started flapping toward them, quickly building speed.

"It isn't an essence monster," Ameliah said. "I can see its status from here. Tenebre Bat, level 6, common. Also, there's more than one. Fire, Jamus."

Bolts of blue energy joined the flashes of white light, one nailing the bat directly in its wing and blasting it completely off. The bat spiraled down into the darkness, but already more were coming, their screams filling the chasm. Ameliah hunted with her sphere, revealing them so Jamus and Val could shoot them down. It wasn't going to be good enough. Carten readied his shields and planted his feet, placing himself in front of the others.

With Detection, Rain could now feel the forms of dozens of the bats rushing toward them, the same slippery feeling of evasiveness masking their exact position. They were getting worryingly close. "Brace for Velocity," he said to warn the others, then activated the skill at maximum intensity, short of using Aura Focus. He couldn't feel the bats' positions with Detection while he was using a different aura, but he could see the one closest to Ameliah's orb suddenly accelerate as the 370% speed boost took effect. The bats screeched, flapping chaotically as they lost the ability to control their flight. There was a flurry of solid impacts as the bats careened into the stone wall of the chasm, only one managing to make it to the tunnel where it was met by Carten's shield.

"Nice!" the big man shouted. Rain canceled the skill and switched back to Detection. He could still hear more screeching echoing from the cavern. Some of the bats that he had sent into the wall were falling downward, and he got a smattering of kill notifications as they hit the ground. He didn't have time to celebrate, however, as he could feel more coming from further out into the cavern. More worrying still were the signals rapidly approaching from the tunnel to his back.

"Behind us! Something's coming!" he shouted.

Carten whipped his head around, then charged away from the edge and toward Rain. "Get behind me!" he shouted.

"Jamus, help Carten." Ameliah's voice cut through the screeching of the bats as she took command. "Val, keep firing at the bats. Rain, keep using Velocity."

Quickly, Rain ducked behind the hulking form of Carten as howls arose down the tunnel, identifying the oncoming signals as belonging to a pack of Dark Hounds. It sounded like there were a lot of them. "Brace!" Rain shouted, then activated Velocity again. Another wave of bats was sent smashing into the wall and there was a chorus of startled yelps from the hounds. Jamus started firing, he and Val standing back to back, one facing toward the tunnel, the other toward the chasm. Val blasted a hole right between the eyes of one of the bats that had dragged itself into the tunnel after crashing into the wall below them.

"Give me full speed, Rain!" Carten shouted. Rain didn't question him, simply removing the man from the blacklist and bringing him up to the full 370% boost. Carten laughed maniacally as he launched himself toward the oncoming hounds, not even trying to control his body as he slammed into them like a great bearded wrecking ball.

"Idiot!" Jamus shouted after him, jerking his last shot up so it splashed harmlessly into the ceiling of the tunnel rather than being drawn to Carten's armor.

"Rain, drop Velocity, let him get up," Ameliah said.

Rain immediately obeyed, canceling the skill and switching back to Detection. There were still more hounds coming, and there were a worrying number of bats in the air and clinging to the walls surrounding the tunnel entrance. Carten struggled back to his feet but was immediately tied down as the hounds surrounding him latched onto his legs, their teeth scraping against the metal of his armor.

"Get em off me, Jamus!" Carten shouted, smashing a hound into the wall with an unhealthy crunch.

"This might hurt!" Jamus said, holding his hand up above his head, like a waiter bearing a tray of drinks in a crowded room. A ball of blue light started to form over his hand, increasing in size and starting to crackle with white shocks of electricity. Jamus's mana dropped precipitously as the ball grew in size, filling the tunnel with electric blue light as it overcame the suppression effect of the lair.

Jamus shouted and brought his arm down, sending the ball flying down the tunnel straight toward Carten. As the ball traveled, electricity arced to the walls and the ceiling with the sound of rushing static and a powerful scent of ozone. The lightning seemed to be drawn to Carten as the ball approached, the bolts veering toward his armor and frying the Dark Hounds clinging to him. Carten roared as the orb detonated in a massive burst of electricity with a resounding crash of thunder.

Carten's health dropped by almost a third as the orb struck, but the effect on the Dark Hounds was much more devastating. Those nearest him were killed instantly, filling the tunnel with the scent of burned hair and meat as they literally exploded from the force of the lightning coursing through them. Even the hounds further away didn't escape unscathed, either dying less dramatically or simply falling to the ground, stunned.

"Aah! What the fuck, Jamus?!" Carten shouted. Somehow, the huge man had managed to stay on his feet as he rode out the blast. He started falling back toward them, keeping his shields facing the recovering hounds. "That really fuckin' hurt!"

"Sorry, only option," Jamus said, pressing a hand to his forehead.

A sudden shout from Val jerked Rain's attention away from the stunned hounds. The light mage was fending off a bat that had managed to make it inside the tunnel. The thing's body was easily as large as a Dark Hound, with its dark, leathery wings filling the entirety of the opening. It lunged for Val's face, but its fangs crashed into a panel of white light that Val raised with an outstretched hand.

He scrunched up his fingers and the panel of light condensed down to a shining point, slipping inside the creature's mouth. Before his hand could follow it, he spread his fingers once more, causing the panel to expand back to full size inside the creature's mouth. The entire front of the bat's face was

sheared off and its corpse fell backward into the chasm. The panel of light lasted another second, then shattered into shards and disappeared.

"Brace!" Rain shouted again, activating Velocity as he felt another wave of bats approaching. Once more, the bats slammed into the wall with the crunch of snapping bone, buying Val time to regain his position near the bridge.

"Good, that's most of the bats. Val can handle it from here," Ameliah said.

Switching back to Detection, Rain saw that it was true. A few remaining bats were clinging to the wall, but there were no more coming toward them through the air. Ameliah recalled her Lunar Orb and sent it down the tunnel toward the hounds, leaving Val to use his own orb to guide his shots.

"Hold the line!" Jamus shouted, moving forward to stand next to Carten. With a crack of lightning, he summoned his two electrical whips, his mana dropping dangerously low. He lashed out at the hounds, leaving arcing trails in the air and in their flesh.

Carten roared and slammed his shields together, smashing a hound's head between them in an explosion of gore. "I can do this all day!" He shouted.

Rain edged away from Jamus as one of his whips almost clipped him on the backswing, sheltering behind Carten's armored form. The two were making headway in thinning the pack, but suddenly Rain caught something else on his Detection aura. Unlike the hounds and the bats, this signal was solid, rushing toward them like a freight train from down the tunnel.

"Something else is coming! It's huge!" he shouted.

"I see it," Carten roared. "Big fuckin' ram thing! Comin' fast."

Jamus faltered, mana exhausted. Carten pushed him out of the way, standing alone against the oncoming monster. He planted his shields against the floor of the tunnel.

"Rebound!" he roared, and though there was no accompanying flash of red light, the sound of the impact as the massive monster slammed into him was deafening in the enclosed space of the tunnel, louder even than the detonation of Jamus's lightning ball.

Rebound was a skill that blocked a single impact, redirecting the force away from the user. The incredible momentum of the monster was blasted back upon itself, the skill ignoring Newton's third law and shielding Carten completely from the repercussions of the collision.

At least, that was what Rain had expected to happen when he heard Carten activate the skill. However, it appeared that even such things had limits. Ameliah's words floated through his thoughts as Carten was sent flying by the impact, warning him that *nothing was absolute.*

Carten didn't even have time to scream as he was blasted backward directly into Rain. The impact tore the air from Rain's lungs, lifting him completely off his feet. He watched in slow motion as he and Carten passed over the chasm's edge. The twisted shape of one of Carten's shields spun in the air beside them where it had been torn free by the impact. As they started to fall, the pale light of Val's orb

shined in the dark like the Moon for which it was named. The light served only to illuminate Rain's expression of horrified realization as he plummeted into the darkness.