

44: Beast

As Rain fell, a sudden crystalline clarity overtook his mind. He didn't even have time to think, he just acted. He tore open his skills window and slammed a point into Force Ward. The wind was rushing by him and the light above was already far in the distance as he accelerated toward the bottom of the chasm. There was no time for thought, no time for planning, no time for math. He activated the skill, forcing as much power into it as he could with all of his modifiers.

He hit the ground.

His mana, which had still been more than half full, was depleted instantly. The force of the impact was so strong that it consumed more mana than he could supply. He blacked out immediately from the massive undermana that he was subjected to.

He didn't feel it when the skill failed and his bones shattered, the unmitigated portion of the fall damage slamming into his pathetic health pool. He also didn't feel it when his Strength ring failed, the enchantment winking out with a puff of escaping mana. No, Rain didn't feel much of anything at all as he slipped into darkness, lying broken on the chasm floor.

"No!" Ameliah yelled as Rain and Carten flew over the edge. She made a lightning-fast grab for them, but even her supernatural speed was too slow to save them. The giant ram bleated in pain and outrage as it recovered from the massive collision. Carten's skill had stunned it, but the monster was purpose-built to withstand impacts, its curled horns not even shattered by the blow. Its name and level hung over its head as it shook off the stun.

Umbral Charger - Level 10

Ameliah screamed in wordless rage as the giant ram reared up and made to stomp on the helpless form of Jamus where he lay propped against the side of the tunnel.

No. Alacrity, Body Strengthening, Concussive Blows, Efficient Movement, Hauberk of Spite, Shrouded by Flame.

Ameliah ignored the massive drain on her resources as she launched herself at the ram, dropping her pack to the floor. She left a wake of fire as she flew through the air, heading unerringly toward the dark form of the massive beast. Her fist met its face with a sharp crack, her hand breaking through its thick skull and spraying chunks of brain and shards of bone across the wall as it exploded out the other side. She swung her legs, pivoting to kick off the wall, then whipped her body around to deliver a massive kick to the ram's chest. The force of the blow sent the car-sized creature flying away from the mage and down the tunnel.

Ameliah was already gone, launching herself past a stunned Val and out over the cavern.

Redirection.

Her forward momentum was immediately deflected and she shot downward with the full force of her leap. Her speed built as gravity took hold, her Lunar Orb struggling to keep up with her rapidly increasing velocity. She spotted the crumpled and broken form of Rain on the ground as her pool of light grew, her eyes flicking to his empty health bar.

Redirection. Redirection.

Her form jerked through the air as she guided herself to land next to Rain with a massive thump of impact.

“Healing Word!” she shouted, slamming her hand on Rain’s back. His health shot to full and his body twisted as his bones started snapping back into place. She cast the spell again, forcing healing mana into his broken body, pumping as much power into the skill as she could. It would have to do. A third cast would likely kill him from the overhealth-induced soulstrain. She took her hand away to avoid causing further damage with her flames, his armor already starting to blacken from the heat.

A sudden screech brought her eyes up to see a circle of Tenebre Bats crawling toward her, their broken wings only contributing to their rage and desire for her death.

“I don’t have time for you!” she shouted, sweeping her arm in a circle above her head. The cloak of flames that surrounded her left a trail of fire in the air, then condensed into a dozen Firebolts as she shaped from the raw fire mana. She sent them flying toward the bats with a shout as she got back to her feet. They died as the flames blasted them apart, but she paid them no mind. Her eyes had locked on to the prone form of Carten in the darkness.

She shot towards him, launching herself in a puff of flame. As she reached him, she spent even more mana to heal him as well. He was in a much better state than Rain, but the metal of his breastplate was crumpled, pressing in on his chest and preventing him from being able to breathe. She canceled her flames and dug her fingers in under the metal, then pulled with all of her might. The armor must have borne some enchantment, as it gave her significant resistance as she tore it away. The metal ultimately lost, however, Ameliah prying it open and flinging the twisted plate off into the darkness.

His chest freed, Carten sucked in a massive breath and coughed, spitting up blood onto the stone.

“What...?” he gasped, but Ameliah was already gone, her flames reigniting as she launched herself to slam completely through a bat in an explosion of gore.

Carten lay panting on the stone in shock as the blazing form of the woman tore through the remaining monsters crawling toward them on the canyon floor, their forms offering her no more resistance than the wind. He looked over to the fallen form of Rain, then down at his own rent armor.

“I’m gonna’ marry that woman,” he said, watching as she tore the wings off of a bat with her bare hands.

Jamus moaned weakly as Ameliah set him on the ground near the wall of the bottom of the chasm. She'd climbed back up to bring him and Val down using some rope she had in her pack, rather than attempting to move Rain.

His head was pounding, his mana almost completely drained. He wasn't entirely clear on what had happened since Carten had pushed him out of the way, his severe mana starvation making him feel like a candle guttering in a strong wind. He'd seen Rain and Carten go over the edge, but after that it was just a blur. Val had defended him from the last of the hounds while Ameliah had rushed down to rescue Rain and Carten. What had happened to the ram, he wasn't sure. He was ashamed to admit that he'd closed his eyes as the monster's hoof had been descending toward his head.

"I still can't believe how amazin' that was!" Carten said, following Ameliah as she went to check on Rain. "I had no idea anyone could move like that!"

She ignored him as she laid a hand on Rain's forehead. "Is he going to be ok?" Val asked as his boots struck the floor, having descended the rope himself after them. "How did he survive the fall?"

"I have no idea." Ameliah shook her head. "It should have killed him. He doesn't have the health to survive something like that. I'm still not sure he did. I healed him, but...he hasn't woken up. We'll have to wait and see."

"He'll be fine," Jamus said, fighting through the pain in his head. The others turned to look at him.

He smiled, looking down at the massive book he'd summoned. "Check your status. Specifically, mana regeneration."

"Ha! He's right," Val laughed. "He's using that Winter aura, even though he's unconscious. Tenacious bastard."

"What the hell was that thing?" Carten asked, looking at Ameliah. "You killed it, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said, but didn't elaborate.

"It was an 'Umbral Charger', whatever that is," Val said. "And she didn't just kill it, she obliterated it. It was level ten and she drove her fist straight through its skull."

"I think you're my new favorite person!" Carten said enthusiastically. "Say, want to get a drink sometime when we get back to town?"

Jamus saw Ameliah roll her eyes and he chuckled, then winced at the spike of pain that it sent through his head. *I don't think it's going to happen, Carten, but keep trying. I believe in you.*

"Seriously, how did you do that?" Val asked. "Why were you hiding your power from us?"

"I wasn't," Ameliah said. "I told you I would hang back until someone was in danger."

"Yeah, fair enough, but that was some Goldplate level shit!" Val protested. "How the depths haven't I heard of you before?"

“Not everyone likes to show off, Val,” Jamus said, squinting at him. “Can you turn down that light? It’s killing me.”

“No way. It isn’t that bright, and I can barely see.”

Ameliah shot Val a cold look as she lowered the intensity of her own light. “Turn it down. Can’t you see his mana?”

Mercifully, Val complied, and Jamus leaned against the wall as the light faded. He was really paying for investing so heavily in Focus at the expense of Clarity. He had no idea how an Animus could even function with a pure allocation. It was bad enough for him with only three-fourths of his points in the stat, not even Magical Synergy taking the edge off.

He checked his mana, watching as the pages of his book turned by themselves. The rate of regeneration was truly impressive by his standards, but with his low Clarity and high mana pool, it was going to take him quite a while to recover. If Rain were awake, he could use Essence Well to restore him, as well as Val and Ameliah, who were both almost empty. Ameliah hadn’t even used Purify, covered in blood and gore as she was. Whatever skills she had used, they had taken a significant toll on both her mana and stamina.

Jamus looked again at Rain’s unconscious form. *I can’t believe I ever doubted him. He’s going to become a legend if we ever make it out of this lair. Dynamo is weak, and Auras are too costly in terms of points as well as mana. But together...*

“So, Jamus,” Val whispered, crouching down and staring at him.

“What?” he said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. Why did nobody care about the fact that he had a massive headache?

“So what’s her deal?” Val said, nodding at Ameliah as she dragged a bat out of the way, making herself a place to sit next to Rain. Carten was hovering behind her, but she was ignoring him.

“What do you mean,” Jamus said.

“What do I mean? I mean, why is someone so strong bothering to help people like us? She’s got to be level 30 at least, maybe even 40.”

“She can probably hear you, you know,” Jamus said, trying to get the other mage to leave him alone. He wasn’t actually sure how good her hearing was, nor did he care at the moment.

“Well, if she can hear me, oh well. She doesn’t seem to be the type who would get offended.”

“And what gives you that impression?” Jamus said, incredulous.

“I don’t know, just a feeling.”

“Perhaps you should go share your feelings with Carten,” he snapped. “I think he wants to form a fan club.”

“Wow, touchy much?” Val said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Go away,” Jamus said, burying his face in his palms. “My head is killing me and I don’t want to talk to anyone right now. Leave me be. Please.”

The younger mage shook his head and stood with a scoff, then walked off to bother someone else.

Kids today. No respect for their elders. He’s making me feel like an old curmudgeon and I’m barely into my 40s.

Jamus sighed and rubbed at his eyes.

I really should keep my mouth shut when I’m mana starved... I’ll apologize later. He did keep me safe from the hounds after Ameliah jumped off the cliff, after all. He just needs to work on his manners.