

When I see the light in the distance, I breathe easier.

[Dennis] I see your light.

I should have messaged her as soon as I started running, but I'd been focused on looking in the intersections, trying to make anything out as I backtracked. She's a lot further away than I expected.

The light pans around frantically until it points in my direction, then at the floor.

"Are you okay?" I call.

She nods. "I saw something." She points down the other branch of the tunnel. "Big, then it vanished in the dark."

I look the way I came as I reach her, the direction the tunnel goes, and that branch. "Are you sure? I think that's how we came. There shouldn't be anything behind us." My confidence wavers as she nods. There's always a possibility something came from one of the other branches, but big? Things in that direction should be lower level.

"Why did you come this far?" I try to make the question neutral, but she winces.

"When I grabbed the light, and they were still coming at me, I panic. Then I tried to follow the sounds of you fighting, but they bounce on the wall and I got turned around until I couldn't tell where you were. Then they stopped, and I saw that thing, and screamed." She looks away.

"Good thing you did. It got me heading here, and it might have scared it away."

I finish my healing bar as I consider something.

[Dennis] Brandon, did you hear me fight from where you are?

[Brandon] No, did you win?

[Dennis] Would I be regaining health if I hadn't?

[Brandon] Good point.

[Dennis] The thing is that Silver made it pretty far and still heard it. I think you ended up in a completely different branch of this dungeon. I don't know if just going forward is going to lead to us joining up.

[Helen] But going back only leads to us meeting up at that blocked tunnel. Unless you're thinking we try a different branch system and hope for the best?

[Dennis] I'm more wondering if there's any chance the dungeon opened it up, since we moved away from there.

I take over cranking the light while I wait for the reply.

[Brandon] I guess that's a possibility, but we moved pretty far from there, and to go back and hit that wall. I think we're better off continuing forward for a while more, and if we don't meet up, then go back and see if it's open. Worse case scenario, you two can exit while me and Hel look for the way around it.

[Dennis] We aren't leaving you behind.

[Brandon] It wouldn't be leaving us behind. It would be camping at the entrance until we make it out. Trust me, we're going to have to end up really deep before the

dungeon throws anything at the two of us that will be a problem.

I glance at Silver and she shrugs.

[Dennis] Okay. We'll keep going, but while you might not have to worry about the monsters in here, those centipedes nearly had me, and only two of them were level nine.

[Brandon] Just take it slow. Retreat if you have to until they stop chasing you. It's not a hundred percent, but most monsters in dungeons are linked to an area. Once you're out of that, they forget about you. Just don't run into another monster while retreating.

I don't point out that's what we've been doing. At least knowing there's a chance we can outrun whatever's after us is good news.

"Are you ready to keep going?" I ask Silver.

"If I can't play, I don't know how useful I'll be."

I squeeze her shoulder. "You're helpful even without your music. Any scratch you give them, helps. And there's bound to be a point where the monsters won't be as sensitive to sound."

"What do you think the next monster will be?" she whispers as we start walking.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it was worms, then flies, then spiders, then centipedes. That feels like a progression. What do you think comes next?"

"I don't know. I guess something that would be a bit larger than centipedes? Not that I know what that might be. Frogs?"

When I shine the light on the dead centipedes, we pause. I'm reminded that I should butcher them for the skill boost, but I'm already covered in some of their entrails, and that's more than enough for me.

I pan the light against the wall until it shines on the first opening to the left and we head there. Then we encounter a spider web and its owner. Taking down one level eight spider feels easy after the two level nines. Then it's two Hides spiders at level six, which is even easier. I start thinking we somehow got turned around, and are heading toward the entrance. I have no idea if that's good or bad, but then we have two level seven centipedes and I figure we're in an area of mixed levels, if that's a thing.

Then we walk through three caves without monsters, and the last one has a bunch of centipedes carapace littering the floor. I exchange a concerned look with Silver before heading into the next tunnel. We're not even a treen into it when I make out something in the distance. I turn off the light and yes, there's a glow somewhere ahead. I blink the light at it.

[Dennis] Brandon. Do you see my flashing light?

[Brandon] No, why?

[Dennis] We just came out of a cave with already dead centipedes, and I thought the light ahead of us was you.

[Brandon] Daylight?

[Dennis] It's too far to tell. We're going to check it out.

[Brandon] Be careful. This far down, there shouldn't be any daylight. It's probably a trap.

[Helen] Wait for us.

[Dennis] I don't think we have that kind of time.

We move slowly and the light gets brighter, as the air smells less stuffy. Then I realize there's bit of a breeze. Silver's expression turns excited, but I keep mine controlled. Brandon's right. We are deep underground. It's possible the terrain drops all of a sudden and that's outside, but I'd rather be ready for trouble.

Then I make out birds singing, and I look at Silver in disbelief. Instead of responding, she grabs me and pushes me against a crack in the wall. Before I can wonder what she's doing. A ruckus passes through the tunnel. All I can make out are shadows flying by really fast.

[Silver] I think we know what killed those centipedes.

[Dennis] Makes one of us. What was that?

[Silver] Birds. I made a perception check just before they burst into the tunnel.

[Dennis] Then that is outside?

Now I'm excited.

When the long ass flock is done, we head for the light, cautiously. It takes effort not to run, to remind myself I'm in a dungeon and anything can be a trap.

The light grows more intense as we approach, and I have to shield my eyes when we reach the cavern until they have adjusted somewhat. It's still far too bright to be comfortable after so long with only the crank light and my ring for illumination.

The one thing that's quickly evident is that the exit isn't at our level. I shield my eyes again as I look up. The cave is the bottom of a chimney that opens into the sky. It's blue without any clouds.

I walk forward until I'm in the middle of the light.

It is beautiful.

And it's really far away.

The walls are smooth and pretty much straight. I have plenty of space for a running start. The big question is if I have the stamina to reach the top.

System Query, Ability: Momentum
Maximum Rank: 16
Prerequisite: none
So long as you are running and maintain 2 points of contact on a surface, you can continue to move even if the surface is not horizontal. Maximum angle from horizontal where the ability can be used: 135 Degrees.
Additional ranks increase the angle by 3 degrees.
Cost: 10 Stamina per second

Statistics pool	
Hit Points:	265
Mana:	90
Will Power:	5900
Stamina:	362
Inventory Slots:	4
Base Weight capability:	115 kg
Base Damage:	11.5
Damage Soak:	54.39
Running Speed:	17.3 KPH

Can I reach the top running full bore in thirty seconds?

Wait, do I have thirty seconds to make it? Running costs me stamina too. The problem is, I don't know how much. Back in court, I could do it for maybe fifteen seconds before being out of breath, but my Stamina's gone up since then. Be safe and cut that by half? So, fifteen seconds? I really need to test my limits. Numbers don't help if I can't translate them into doing something.

"Silver," I whisper, then look around nervously for something to react to the sound, but it's only us here at the moment. "What's the range on your Strength of the Underdog buff?"

"So long as you can hear it, it works."

"Do you think I'd be able to hear it all the way up there?"

She looks up. "Probably? The walls are smooth stone, so the acoustics should help the sound carry. Why?"

"I might be able to get up there. But the problem is I can't carry you."

[Dennis] Brandon, how much rope do you have?

[Brandon] Twenty meters, why?

Is that enough?

[Dennis] I might have a way out, but it requires running up a wall and I can't carry anyone. I figure if we have enough rope, I can run up, secure it and the rest of you can climb it.

[Brandon] Dennis, if you want to leave the dungeon, you just have to backtrack to the entrance. Me and Hel can make our way back. I'm not going to hold—

Silver frowns and I look at her. I didn't know messages like that could be interrupted.

[Dennis] Brandon, is everything okay?

His health might have dropped slightly, but unlike my bar, the ones in the team window don't flash anytime there's a change. He has so much I can't be sure I'm not imagining it.

"Dennis?" Silver calls, sounding worried as she looks in the direction we entered.

Then I hear it. The ruckus is getting louder.

I look around for a place to hide, but every other passages are just as far from me and I can't seem to decide on one. Then Silver tackles me to the floor, and the light is swallowed up by the flock.