

116: Squall

Training Overview

Combat Experience Earned
13,110

General Experience Earned
Health Use: 164
Stamina Use: 254
Mana Use: 24,759

Skill Experience Earned
Mana Manipulation: 524 [Rank Up]

Tolerances
Recovery: +1
Vigor: +1
Clarity: +3
Attribute Buff: +2

Rain sat silently, staring up at the stars. It was around three in the morning, an hour after he'd come down from the wall, but he couldn't sleep. The latest iteration of his training dialog hung above him, blocking his view of the heavens. It was showing him his progress since he'd last reset it, which had been the day before. He'd triggered the experience-application process several times between then and now, but he'd been avoiding looking at the results.

The rank-up of Mana Manipulation was why.

It was the last.

Rain closed his eyes, blocking out the flickering firelight and the distant twinkle of stars, leaving the blue dialog alone in the darkness behind his eyelids. *Maybe if I look, it will distract me enough to sleep...*

With a deep sigh, he opened his full status, including all of the available skills in the trees he was interested in. It would be a bit overwhelming, but he'd summarize in a minute once he found the changes.

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
13,469	22,750	815,552

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
HP	351	400	560/d
SP	96	200	670/d
MP	6,495	6,495	3.6/s

Dark Revenant's Armor

	CUR	MAX	RGN
DUR	13,338	13,338	0
SAT	0	13,202	-92/s
CHG	7,902	14,209	-65/d

Attributes

175/155	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	BUFF	SYN
STR	6.8	20	10	10/37	34%
RCV	15.8	56	10	46/26	44%
END	3.6	10	10	0/16	36%
VGR	22.1	67	10	57/37	47%
FCS	10	10	10	0/50	100%
CLR	262	262	200	62/124	100%

Resistances

50/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	1.0	0%
COLD	1.0	0%
LIGHT	1.0	0%
DARK	51.0	0%
FORCE	1.0	0%
ARCANE	1.0	0%
CHEMICAL	1.0	0%
MENTAL	1.0	0%

Unlocked Skill Trees

Tier 0: 144

Tier 1: 144

Tier 2: 144

Tier 3: 53

Tier 4: 0

Magical Utility

Tier 0

Intrinsic Focus (10/10)

Multiply base mana by 300%

Intrinsic Clarity (10/10)

Multiply base mana regeneration by 300%

Tier 1

Channel Mastery (10/10)

Allows intuitive control of channeled skill intensity

Minimum skill intensity: 0%

Maximum skill intensity: 200%

Skill mana cost modified by intensity adjustment

Mana Manipulation (10/10)

Allows internal control of mana

Allows expulsion of mana to environment

Allows transfer of mana to and from capacitive items with direct contact

Maximum transfer rate 1200.0 mp/s (fcs)

Overcharge (0/10)

Delay cast of an immediate spell to charge it with mana

Charge time reduced by mana manipulation

Boost effect intensity by up to 120%

Maximum mana charge 120%

Requires 5 ranks in Intrinsic Focus

Tier 2

Magical Synergy (10/10)

Enables limited synergistic cross-coupling of magical attributes
25.0% of Focus contributes to mana regen
25.0% of Clarity contributes to mana

Tier 3

Mana Sight (0/10)

Passively perceive mana within the environment
Resolution is 10% of that of mundane optical sight
Activate to perceive mana within entities
Active Cost: 10 mp/s
Compatible with other sensory skills at 10% resolution while activated
Requires 10 ranks in Mana Manipulation

Elemental Refinement (0/10)

Hidden
Shaping kata for elemental mana
Requires 10 ranks in Mana Manipulation
Requires 10 ranks in Magical Synergy

Tier 4

Locked

Utility Auras

Tier 0

Spring (0/10)

Boost S.Regen by 18% for all entities
Range: 1.8 meters
Cost: 1 mp/hr

Purify (10/10)

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination
Range: 18 meters
Cost: 100 mp/min

Summer (0/10)

Boost H.Regen by 18% for all entities
Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Winter (10/10)

Boost M.Regen by 180% for all entities

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 10 mp/hr

Tier 1

Life Well (0/10)

Convert mana to health and transfer to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 1.8 hp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 1.8 meters

Requires 5 ranks in Summer

Velocity (10/10)

180.00% boost to speed for all entities

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 10 mp/s

Detection (10/10)

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 2.07 mm

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 10 mp/s

Energy Well (0/10)

Convert mana to stamina and transfer to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 1.8 sp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 1.8 meters

Requires 5 ranks in Spring

Essence Well (10/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 18 mp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 18 meters

Tier 2

Precision (0/10)

18.00% boost to physical precision for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/s

Requires 10 ranks in Velocity

Requires 10 ranks in Energy Well

Acuity (0/10)

18.00% boost to physical senses for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/s

Requires 10 ranks in Detection

Requires 10 ranks in Essence Well

Tier 3

Empire of Brawn (0/10)

Boost Strength by 18 for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 20 mp/s

Requires 50 ranks in Utility Auras

Requires 10 ranks in Life Well

Empire of Will (0/10)

Boost Focus by 18 for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 20 mp/s

Requires 50 ranks in Utility Auras

Requires 10 ranks in Essence Well

Empire of Grit (0/10)

Boost Endurance by 18 for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 20 mp/s

Requires 50 ranks in Utility Auras

Requires 10 ranks in Energy Well

Tier 4

Locked

Defensive Auras

Tier 0

Cold Ward (0/10)

Increase cold resistance by 5.4% for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Heat Ward (0/10)

Increase heat resistance by 5.4% for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Tier 1

Dark Ward (0/10)

Increase dark resistance by 5.4% for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Light Ward (0/10)

Increase light resistance by 5.4% for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Chemical Ward (0/10)

Increase chemical resistance by 5.4% for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Mental Ward (0/10)

Increase mental resistance by 5.4% for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Arcane Ward (0/10)

Increase arcane resistance by 5.4% for all entities

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Tier 2

Force Ward (10/10)

Increase physical resistance by 54% for all entities

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Tier 3

Suppression (0/10)

Increase mana costs for all entities by 18.9 mp (fcs)

Range: 1.8 meters

Cost: 1 mp/s

Requires at least 1 rank in an aura of each element

Tier 4

Locked

Offensive Auras

Tier 0

Immolate (10/10)

132-151 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 50 mp/s

Refrigerate (10/10)

132-151 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 50 mp/s

Tier 1

Shroud (0/10)

13-15 dark (fcs) damage per second to entities

Darkens environment (fcs)

Range: 1.8 meters
Cost: 5 mp/s
Requires 5 ranks in Refrigerate

Shear (0/10)

13-15 force (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment
Not occluded by mundane materials
Range: 1.8 meters
Cost: 10 mp/s
Requires 15 ranks in Offensive Auras

Radiance (0/10)

13-15 light (fcs) damage per second to entities
Brightens environment (fcs)
Range: 1.8 meters
Cost: 5 mp/s
Requires 5 ranks in Immolate

Tier 2

Fulmination (0/10)

13-15 arcane (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment
Sufficient damage causes paralysis
Range: 1.8 meters
Cost: 5 mp/s
Requires 5 ranks in Radiance
Requires 10 ranks in Immolate

Corrosion (0/10)

13-15 chemical (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment
Sufficient damage disrupts health regeneration
Range: 1.8 meters
Cost: 5 mp/s
Requires 5 ranks in Shroud
Requires 10 ranks in Refrigerate

Tier 3

Discombobulate (0/10)

13-15 mental (fcs) damage per second to entities
Not occluded by mundane materials
Sufficient damage causes hallucinations

Damage applies to mana instead of health
Range: 1.8 meters
Cost: 5 mp/s
Requires 50 ranks in Offensive Auras

Tier 4

Locked

Aura Metamagic

Tier 0

Extend Aura (10/10)

Extend aura range by 10 meters
Multiply aura mana cost by 300%

Amplify Aura (10/10)

Multiply aura intensity by 200%
Multiply aura mana cost by 300%

Tier 1

Aura Focus (10/10)

Focus on an aura to boost its output
Multiply aura intensity by 300%
Multiply aura range by 300%
Multiply aura mana cost by 300%
User loses all external senses while focusing

Aura Synergy (10/10)

Increase all aura output by 1.0% for each rank in any aura
Effective boost: 80.0%

Tier 2

Aura IFF (10/10)

User may exempt entities from direct aura effects at will
Selected entities receive 0.0% aura output

Prismatic Intent (0/10)

User may maintain 2 auras simultaneously
Requires 10 ranks in Aura Synergy
Requires 1 rank in 15 different auras

Tier 3

Ethereal Aura (0/10)

User may exempt the aura from environmental effects at will
Aura gains 5% resistance to environmental occlusion and absorption
Environment receives 90% aura output
Requires 10 ranks in Mana Manipulation
Requires 10 ranks in Aura IFF

Aura Compression (10/10)

Compress aura output, reducing range to boost intensity
Increase intensity by 2.0% per meter of compression

Tier 4

Locked

Rain's eyes moved behind his eyelids, roving over the solid dome of blue above him. It looked something like the sky would have had an extremely overzealous team of sky-writers spent an afternoon practicing their block-printing.

Rain snorted. *I am officially too tired to sleep. That wouldn't even work; the wind would—*

Rain's eyes slammed open as Detection fired, a Stumper appearing on his radar. Half-way back to his feet, he forced himself to stop. Slowly, he lowered himself back to the ground. He reactivated Detection, channeling it at a low level to monitor the creature. It was outside the walls.

It wasn't his problem.

It was Carten's watch now. In truth, it had been since midnight, but he hadn't felt comfortable leaving him solely in charge in case something happened. *Damn it, he's fine. He knows what he's doing, even if it doesn't usually look like it.*

Rain laid his head back on his bundled cloak, his neck still stiff with tension. Drawing Detection back down to the radius of the camp was like pulling a stubborn nail out of a block of wood with his teeth, but he managed it.

We're safe here. As safe as we were behind the Watch's walls in Fel Sadanis. Safer. Even if I don't trust Carten to not mess it up, Ameliah and Tallheart aren't worried. They've been asleep for hours. They're not stressing like I am...

Before he was tempted to expand Detection again, Rain turned it off completely. He left his radar-macro running, though, using the reduced range. It would ping every minute, theoretically waking him if something spawned within the camp. *That is, of course, if I manage to get to sleep at all.*

Turning his attention back to the menus above him, Rain quickly filtered away everything except for the distraction that he'd been seeking. Mana Manipulation unlocked a tier-three spell in every single tree, it was said, though only if the other requirements were also met. Soon enough, only two skill cards remained.

Elemental Refinement (0/10)

Shaping kata for elemental mana

Requires 10 ranks in Mana Manipulation

Requires 10 ranks in Magical Synergy

Ethereal Aura (0/10)

User may exempt the aura from environmental effects at will
Aura gains 5% resistance to environmental occlusion and absorption
Environment receives 90% aura output
Requires 10 ranks in Mana Manipulation
Requires 10 ranks in Aura IFF

Amelia had told him all about Elemental Refinement—it was well-known, at least to silverplates—but Ethereal Aura was new.

Rain stared at the skill card.

...

It was perfect. It would solve so many of his problems.

...

And he couldn't get it until at least level twenty-six. Twenty-seven if he wanted Prismatic Intent first.

...*Balls.*

Breakfast was mashed-Stumper (about as good as it sounded), Stumper-sausage (not really sausage, just pan-fried strips of mushroom flesh, heavily-salted, and approximately the right shape), and one lone raw carrot (dessert). The carrot, Rain was saving for last.

As he chewed squeakily on one of the sausages, he ran through the other types of monsters in his head, trying to decide if any of them would be worth trying to cook. Some, like Snow Sprites, were obvious non-starters, but something like one of those Ice Coursers they'd been running into could have potential. Rain wasn't keen on the idea of eating a cat—which is what an Ice Courser looked like if cats were from hell, and it had frozen over—but who knew? They might taste like chicken. Regardless, he would be keeping an eye out today for anything that looked even remotely edible, monstrous or otherwise.

Oh, what I'd give for a rockmelon. Rain shook his head, swallowing and reaching for his coffee. The coffee was the one good thing about the morning. Mlem had charged him three Tel for this single cup, but he didn't even care.

"Rain?"

"Hmm?" Rain looked up, blearily focusing on Vanna. He felt hung-over, but it was really just the lack of sleep getting to him.

"What did you think?" Vanna asked, indicating the pile of papers sitting on the table next to his breakfast.

Rain glanced down at them and sighed. He'd already glanced over the top few pages but decided to postpone a detailed analysis until the coffee had kicked in. What he'd seen in his quick look hadn't been encouraging.

"I have some...notes," he said. *I think we're going to need a second round of math class.* He gestured to the top sheet of the stack. "The idea of dues is workable, but a flat rate has some problems with it. A more progressive tax system would probably be better, with increasing rates for the highest contributors. Mlem probably still has that book about tax code in Osar, if you want to ask him about it. It's a little backward compared to what I'm thinking, but it could give you a good summary of some of the issues that can come up. We're also going to need some sort of exchange fee, just like the Bank has between copper and Tel. I didn't want to make this complicated, but the more I think about it, the more I think I'm going to have to if I want it to work."

"Mmm," Vanna said. "I told Romer not to use pen. He didn't listen. Also, if you think I'm reading a book on tax code, you're going to be disappointed."

Rain shrugged, taking another sip of coffee, savoring it. "I guess for today we're working on even-split again. Do you have the total for what we got last night?"

"Three hundred fifty-seven Tel, eight Chem, and two Cold," Vanna said.

"Damn," Rain said, rubbing at his eyes. "I was afraid of that."

"What?" Vanna asked. "Sounds like a lot to me."

"Yeah, but most of that came from the first few hours," Rain said, fighting a jaw-cracking yawn. "If we'd been going at that pace all night, it would have been thousands, not hundreds. Only the older monsters seem to drop anything. They came out of hiding once night fell, but once we killed them all, the freshly-spawned stuff was basically worthless."

"Not completely worthless," said Carten, approaching from the left. He had a steaming plate in his hand. "Here, Rain, try one'a these."

Rain blinked, staring at the large plate. There were crispy black...sticks on it, covered in some sort of reddish sauce.

"What are they?" Rain asked dubiously as Carten clonked the plate on top of the pile of documents and pulled up a stool.

"Do ya really wanna know?" Carten asked, picking up one of the sticks. He bit into it with a crunch and made a wiggling gesture with his hand. He dipped the stick in some of the sauce and took another bite, speaking with his mouth full. "Tha sauce helps a lot. Jamus made it."

Hesitantly, Rain reached out and took one. Upon further inspection, it looked like—

"Carten, are these Coal Lurker legs?"

"Frost Lurker," Carten said, crunching away industriously. "A big pile of 'em showed up at, oh, sixth bell. They've gotta layer of ice or some shit on 'em, but once tha' melts, the shell's thin. Nice'n crunchy."

"Eew," Rain said. "I'm not quite *that* tired of Stumper yet."

"Suit yerself," Carten said. He grabbed another leg and began munching on it with gusto.

Rain looked down at the lurker leg he was still holding, then up at Vanna, who had turned a bit green. Shaking his head, he peeked under the table, then lobbed the charred leg toward

Dozer, who engulfed it immediately. Rain snorted as the slime's delight washed over him.

Good garbage disposal.

Getting underway took surprisingly little time. Ameliah left the fortifications mostly intact, merely lowering a section of the wall to allow the sleds to escape. She wasn't going to be scouting ahead today, so Rain was expecting there to be a bit more monster trouble as they traveled. It was all a part of the plan for getting people used to combat.

After Rain had finished his discussion with Vanna, he'd let her call the company to order and update them on the spoils from last night and brief them on the plan for the day. The news of the bounty of Tel was well-received, though there was some grumbling from those who hadn't been in favor of an even split. On the whole, though, most were happy. To a common laborer, seven Tel was two-weeks salary, and they'd earned it in a single night.

To lessen the grumbling, Rain had pushed through a modification to the even-split rule for today's march. The top five participants in any encounter—judged by the cumulative level of monsters killed—would now be entitled to a higher reward, with first-place getting ten shares, second-place getting five, and third, fourth, and fifth getting three. It was going to be a bit of a competitive shit-show with people like Val involved, but there was no helping that.

The company was still working in Tel and Crysts, as the credit system needed some significant revision. Unless they found a lair or something, which was unlikely, it would be fine. It was just annoying. Without the credit system or an established exchange rate for Crysts, Rain couldn't use them for anything. The Cold Crysts, for example, Tallheart could probably use to make him something to boost his Cold resistance. That would let him use Refrigerate at full power without frost-burning himself. If they kept finding Crysts and Tallheart came around on the whole equipment thing, Rain could see every member of the company eventually getting an amulet or something that would let him use Refrigerate freely. *That would be amazing...*

Rain shook his head. It would all come with time. It had only been a few days since he'd founded the company, after all.

The group set out with Rain marching beside the forgewagon so Meloni could ride for the morning, it being her turn. Tallheart didn't seem to mind letting others ride, though he didn't really speak with anyone other than Rain, Jamus, and Ameliah. Again, it was only the second proper day. In this case, Cloud would bring him around, Rain thought. Meloni was riding with the puppy on her lap, though it looked ridiculous, as Cloud was decidedly not going to be a lapdog once he was done growing.

As the day wore on, the company made good progress. Monster attacks were more frequent than the first day, but with the competition in place, the awakened were on high alert. It didn't even seem to be about the reward, with Val, Mahria, and Kettel being the most caught up in the competition, surprising no one. Rain's money was on Val. Kettel's aim was shit, and a good proportion of the monsters out here had some measure of Cold resistance, which was making things difficult for Mahria.

The kind of monsters that would spawn in a ranked zone depended on ambient elemental mana concentration. One of the maps Rain had seen included notations for the dominant mana-aspect of various cities. Fel Sadanis was Chemical, obviously. As for why Cold monsters were spawning, that was simply because it was winter. Ambient Heat and Cold mana fluctuated with the seasons, which was why those were the two most common elements when it came to Crysts. You could find them almost anywhere, in theory.

Vestvall had been marked on the map as neutral, so unless things had changed with the Shift, they'd cross out of Stumper territory at some point. It was, therefore, all the more important for them to identify an alternate food source. Preferably not Frost Lurkers.

They stopped for lunch around noon, just after they were attacked by a small pack of Ice Coursers. It looked like Rain was about to find out what cat tasted like, as Ujesh, who'd been a

trapper, was already butchering one of the feline creatures. He was working on removing its entrails, having already stripped it of its pelt and set the thick fur aside. Someone here doubtless knew the process of turning demon-cat skin into mittens, which was good, as Kettel—who was currently soulstrained out of his mind and riding on the forgewagon—had managed to burn his own gloves off.

Whatever you wanted to say about Kettel's magical expertise, he was working hard, at least. He'd kept chucking Firebolts long after Mahria had given up, right up until he'd collapsed. Rain couldn't throw stones, having done worse to himself on several occasions. Val had also pulled a Val, of course, but he at least was still in a condition to walk.

Rain wasn't that concerned that they would get into a situation they couldn't handle, even with several overtaxed mages. Ameliah was there, and Jamus, at least, was pacing himself. Also, Rain was confident that Mahria's whining about her headache wouldn't stop her from casting if she really needed to. He was getting the sense that she wasn't overly fond of training, but still, it was surprising how quickly soulstrain had crippled her. Kettel's adolescent stubbornness shouldn't have been enough to overcome all the experience she'd had slinging mana for who knew how many years.

Rain snorted and put it out of his mind. People seemed to have things well in hand setting up for lunch, so after some indecision, he decided that it was high time that he just took a little time to himself. He hadn't had a chance to meditate yesterday, and there was something he'd been meaning to do for a while now.

Rain walked over to the forgewagon. Kettel was dragging himself away, clutching his head as he fled from Tallheart, who had already ousted Dozer from the bed and was working noisily on something at the anvil. Rain waved to him, and Tallheart paused his hammering to raise an eyebrow.

"Hey Tallheart," Rain said tiredly. "I'm just going to sit up front while I meditate. Can you do me a favor and glare at anyone who looks like they're going to bother me? I'm going to be in Aura Focus, and I don't really want to be disturbed until we're ready to move again."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, nodding and resuming his work.

"Thanks, Tallheart," Rain said.

Stopping next to the passenger seat, Rain slipped off his helmet and slid it into the footwell next to the pedals. He then removed his gauntlets, playing the ring-game to avoid losing his buffed health. He kept going, removing bits of armor until finally, he was standing self-consciously in his forceweave underwear. It was a full bodysuit, and thick enough so it wasn't indecent or anything, but still.

Rain hurriedly wrapped his cloak around his shoulders, then quick-stepped around the front of the forgewagon, the snow frigid against his bare feet. He clambered into the driver's seat beside his piled armor and sat back, thankful for the warmth of the smelter. *Whew. This feels so weird. Is this what it's like to be a hermit crab?*

He shook his head, then stretched out the neck of the bodysuit and reached in to retrieve one of three metal plates that were tucked into pockets on the inside. Removing the armor had been necessary just to get access to them. Raising his cloak to screen the object from view, Rain pulled it out and peeked at it before settling down in the seat again.

Accolade of the Hoarfrost Labyrinth

Settling his cloak about him, Rain sat back with the accolade held in his lap, both hands touching the metal, still warm from his body heat despite the color. *Okay, let's see if I can do something here.*

Focusing on his breathing, Rain slipped into Essence Meditation, blocking out the world with Aura Focus and disabling his auto-triggered macros to avoid distractions. He'd gotten better at suppressing extraneous thoughts, but it still took him a good twenty minutes before he felt as if he was getting close to the required state of mind for access to his soul. Being dead tired helped. He kept his grip firm on the metal plate, though he couldn't feel it against his skin thanks to Aura Focus.

Connection...

Rain switched his focus from his breath to the image of the accolade, picturing it in his mind. He let his mental eye roam over the memory. He traced the engraved grooves of the text, and let himself get lost in the deep blue sheen of the metal. He concentrated on the smooth sensation of the plate against his fingertips and tried to picture a connection spreading from his skin to the metal.

Another ten minutes passed; then, chaos.

Rain didn't react. That was the key. He remained focused on his image, ignoring the tumult, as a monk beneath a waterfall ignores the pounding spray. There was a rapid flicker, then another. Rain began to get a sense of a bond forming, extending off through the chaos. He started to get a sense of *something*, lurking out there in the tumult. *If I could just...*

"Shit!"

Rain swore, opening his eyes as the chaos overwhelmed him, kicking him out of tranquility and back into his physical body. The ringing of Tallheart's hammer pounded on his ears as he squinted against the noon sun's light, reflected from the snow.

A few people were looking in his direction, but he ignored them. Gritting his teeth, he squeezed his eyes back shut, activating Aura Focus again. *Damn it, I was so close. That must have been like four whole seconds. I've never gotten that far before. I could feel a connection between the plate and my...avatar? No, it wasn't like that; it's not soul space. It was like...the chaos is my soul...meat? The substance of my soul? Whatever. The connection was going through it, out to the plate from...me? My brain? An organ in my soul?* Rain thought back to some of the phrasing the Majistraal obelisk had used, fixing on one particular word. *My core?*

Rain clamped down on the excitement, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. Excited was the last thing he needed to be right now.

Try again.

Jamus slowly stirred the simmering cauldron of stew with a long-handled wooden spoon, watching as Meloni tempted Cloud with a morsel of raw meat.

"Okay, Cloud, sit," she commanded.

Cloud sat.

"Lie down."

Cloud lay down.

"Roll over."

Cloud flopped onto his back, paws wagging in the air as he squirmed excitedly in the snow before completing the roll.

"He picked that up quickly," said Jamus, raising an eyebrow. "Didn't you just start teaching him that one last night?"

Cloud snapped the piece of meat out of the air as Meloni tossed it to him. She tilted her head. "Now that you mention it, yes, it is a bit... Say, do you think that aura of Rain's works on animals?"

Jamus stopped stirring. "Huh."

Meloni lowered her hand, allowing Cloud to happily lick the blood from her fingers. "I mean, I don't see why it wouldn't." She glanced down at Cloud. "Animals remember stuff. The aura boosts memory. It makes sense that it would..."

"I think you're right," Jamus said, letting go of the spoon. It was time to add the meat, so he rolled up his sleeves and started filling a bowl with the cubed pieces that Meloni had been preparing. He nodded to her as he worked. "The first adventure I went on with Rain, we had this horse that, well... Let's just say it was a little odd by the end."

"Odd how?" Meloni asked, looking down at Cloud, who was sitting patiently, his tail violently brushing a hole in the snow as he stared at the meat.

"Just...odd," Jamus said with a shrug. "I wouldn't worry about it, but maybe we should talk to Rain. He can exclude Cloud from the aura if he wants to."

"Hmm," Meloni said, looking down at the happy dog. "No, I don't think I want him to do that. You're a smart boy, aren't you?" she asked, raising the pitch of her voice.

Cloud barked happily. Jamus smiled as he tipped the bowlful of meat into the cauldron.

"Um, Jamus..." Meloni said.

Something in her tone made him look up.

"I've been meaning to ask you..." she said, hesitantly. "I know you probably don't want to talk about your old family. But since we're going to Vestvall... What are you going to do if they're..."

"Dead?" Jamus asked.

"Alive," Meloni said.

"Oh..." Jamus said, looking down at his bloody hands. He bent to wipe them in the snow, then searched around for a towel as he tried to think of a response.

After a few more seconds of silence, he sighed. "I suppose...I don't really know. I was so angry when I left..." He shook his head. "You don't want to hear this. I know I've hinted at what happened, but..."

"It's okay. You can tell me."

Jamus sighed and, lacking any proper seating, sat down on a piled mound of snow. He immediately had to fend off Cloud, who rushed over and tried to lick his face. He smiled, running his fingers through Cloud's thick fur as Meloni joined him. She was wearing one of the company-issued gambesons and a cloak, so the cold wouldn't bother her, for all that she wasn't awakened.

Jamus's mouth worked, then he spoke. "Well, I told you before how my...wife cheated on me, but I didn't tell you that my children are, well... They're not *my* children. At least, I don't think so."

"Jamus..." Meloni said, laying a hand on his arm.

"It's fine," Jamus said. "I still love them. I just couldn't bear to be around with that bastard... living in my house. Sleeping with my wife. Once it was all out in the open, he just sort of moved in. He was a noble, you know, and not even a powerful one. Knowing what I know

now, he was probably only level five or something, but in Vestvall, that made him practically a king."

"What are you going to do if he's still alive when we get there?"

Jamus pulled off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "Why does everyone assume I want revenge?"

Cloud pressed his head against him, unhappy that he wasn't the one being petted anymore. Jamus pulled the squirming puppy into a hug, then shook his head. "I want nothing to do with the man, or with...her. But my children..." He sighed. "I'd like to see them again. I was thinking...if they're alive, they could come with me. Join Ascension. Bens is old enough. He'll have turned twenty-three as of a few weeks ago, and by now, he's likely married that girl of his, or maybe a different one." Jamus laughed sadly. "For all I know, I could be a grandpa."

"That would be wonderful," Meloni said, wrapping both him and Cloud in a hug. She buried her face into his shoulder, squeezing tightly. "They're alive. I can feel it."

Jamus lowered his head to rest atop hers, blinking away sudden tears. An image of the smiling face of his baby daughter had flashed through his mind, clear and sharp as anything, even without Rain's aura influencing his memory. "Thank you," he said, extracting his arm so he could hug back, taking comfort in her warmth against him.

"Oi!" Carten's voice shouted as he crunched up to them through the snow. "Ain't ya supposed ta be cooking? You're makin' me sad. Don't ya know I just got dumped by the love o' me life? Bloody insensitive of you, Jamus!"

Jamus groaned, not looking up.

Meloni laughed and pulled away. "Hello, Carten," she said, pushing herself to her feet. "Did you get what we sent you for?"

"What you...? Oh, uh... Couldn't find any. Found this, though. Look, Jamus! Beer!"

Jamus snorted and looked up. Carten was holding a small wooden keg above his head, staring up at it rapturously as if it was some sort of holy artifact. Jamus released Cloud and grabbed his hat before getting back to his feet. "Carten, you oaf, stop talking and pour me a mug."

Rain woke, disoriented, to the sound of voices. The words seemed to come to him from a distance. He became aware of a gentle rocking, as if he was in a car rolling slowly down a bumpy dirt road.

"Tallheart?" he slurred sleepily, looking over to the driver's seat, but the person driving wasn't who he'd expected. Ameliah was sitting there, smiling at him as she pedaled.

"Hey you, you're finally awake," she said. "You were trying to cross the border, right?"

What? That line... It sounds familiar...

"Ah, oops, we woke him," said Mlem, who had been the other voice Rain had heard. "Oh well. Probably for the best, anyway. Like I was saying, I recognized that rock. We're almost there. The village should be just on the other side of this hill."

Rain rubbed at his eyes blearily, reality coming back into focus. He blinked as he realized that the sun, which had been almost directly overhead, had jumped across the sky and was now filtering through frost-laden branches. The forest had thickened, the snowy road now more like a tunnel. He blinked again, fighting against the disorientation.

"Perhaps another cup of coffee, Rain?" Mlem said, laughing and twiddling his fingers. "To help you wake up?"

"I...fell asleep?" Rain asked.

"Hmm, perhaps the coffee isn't a bad idea," Ameliah said. "I don't know how you drink that stuff, Rain, but it's supposed to give you energy, right? You were really out of it. You didn't even stir when I moved you. I told you you haven't been sleeping enough."

"When you...what?" Rain looked down, then jumped as he realized that he wasn't where he'd been when he'd closed his eyes to meditate. He was sitting in the passenger seat now, which meant...

"Shit!" Rain swore, throwing off his cloak and patting his chest, feeling for the accolades. There were only two. The third, the one he'd been experimenting with, was gone. He looked up, his heart hammering. "Ameliah, did you find...I was holding..."

"What in the depths?" Mlem shouted. "Ameliah, stop!"

Rain shouted as the forgewagon lurched, fighting to stay in his seat. Ameliah had engaged the levers for the breaks without disengaging the drive, snapping a belt in the process.

"Shit," she swore as they rattled to a bouncing halt.

Rain barely even registered her words. He was staring forward, eyes wide. They'd crested a rise, and in the distance, he could now see a violent squall of snow through the trees. It was like someone had built a wall out of a blizzard.

"By all that glitters in the southern seas..." Mlem said, staring at the snowy wall. "Is that what I think it is?"

Ameliah stood up, staring at the swirling barrier ahead. Her eyes narrowed, then opened wide in recognition. "Yes, it is." She glanced down at Rain. "Didn't you say you had a Diviner scout this way?"

Rain just stared up at her.

Ameliah pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and sat back in her chair, returning her gaze to the squall. "How the hells did he miss a lair on the damn surface?"