

241: Impasse

Progress Report

marker_1: horde_handled [3061 First Harvest 01 18:02]
marker_2: foundry_approach [3061 First Harvest 03 21:00]

Span: 2.1 days

Character

Total Exp: 7,936,316 -> 12,638,993 (+4,702,677)
↳ Monster Kills: 2,501,977
↳ Stamina Use: 143,720
↳ Mana Use: 2,056,980

Skills

Healing Word: +11,175 exp, 5 -> 10 (+5)
Attract: +19,530 exp, 6 -> 10 (+4)
Airwalk: +33,885 exp, 7 -> 10 (+3)
Empire of Brawn: +12,000 exp, 2 -> 5 (+3)
Empire of Drive: +12,000 exp, 2 -> 5 (+3)
Empire of Grit: +12,000 exp, 2 -> 5 (+3)
Empire of Will: +12,000 exp, 2 -> 5 (+3)
Prismatic Intent: +74,222 exp, 11 -> 13 (+2)

Total Known Skill Trees:

Tier 0: 144
Tier 1: 144
Tier 2: 144
Tier 3: 144
Tier 4: 102

Against their better judgment, Rain and Ameliah had been traveling with the Illuminator and his entourage for two days. Those days had been both enlightening and frustrating beyond belief.

Legruz was undeniably skilled, able to bend spells even more freely than Sana—the previous record holder—though he wasn't exceptionally tidy with his casts, sending wasted mana flying everywhere outside his 'canvas'. The output, though, was flawless to the photon, putting the mural in the teleport terminal to shame. While his default style was overly bombastic to Rain's taste, he was perfectly capable of everything from uncanny photorealism to full-on acid-trip insanity.

However, the truly tantalizing thing was the runes he used to anchor his creations.

It was subtle—so subtle that Rain had missed it dozens of times before he'd realized what he was sensing—but they were built with more than just mana. The Illuminator worked with soul. Invested ordered essence.

That was where the frustration began.

Rain had been circumspect in his questions at first, unwilling to tip Legruz off that he was on to him, but eventually, he'd resorted to bluntness and been met with an unyielding wall of hypocrisy. Legruz knew about the soul even after it became clear he couldn't see it as they could. And yet he outright refused to say so much as a single word on the subject while demanding Rain and Ameliah answer his every question.

They couldn't talk about Reading, obviously, but they were more than willing to trade other, more general insights. For example, he and Ameliah had both ordered their souls to feed their bodies with only the cleanest spiritual fuel—something they'd gathered Legruz knew nothing about. They'd also gathered that this was exactly what Legruz had used to track them, following the wake of their powerful, clean, and hungry domains through the ambient

Or tried to, at any rate. He doubted he'd have been able to dissuade him without resorting to assault. Now, they were too deep, and the point was moot.

Closing his eyes, Rain sent a fragment of his attention forward to where an unseen monster had just appeared to Detection. Unseen and unknown. Speeding his thoughts, he sent his awareness dancing through the maze of tunnels to find that there was indeed a route between the monster and them. That made it a threat. In a rank twenty-four zone and with bronzes to protect, he had no choice but to act with extreme and immediate prejudice.

Shroud.

The monster went berserk, the signal vibrating wildly as the creature searched for its assailant. The codex said this place was Force aspect, which made Dark a good pick, all things being equal. It also said it tended toward lone, powerful monsters—elites, if not full-on reapers. The thing, whatever it was, would likely take some time to die.

"...TeeeeeeeeeeIIIIIIII meeeeeeeeeeeeeee. TeeeeeeeeeeIIIIIIII meeeeeeeeeeeeeee..."

Finding the noise even worse slowed down, Rain let his thoughts return to normal speed. His increased mana expenditure apparently went unnoticed.

"...Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me..."

"I'm going to stab him," Rightbeard—actual name Henton Allensten—muttered. "Just in the leg. It'll be worth it."

"I'm surprised they haven't beaten you to it," said Leftbeard—aka Etstez Allensten, Henton's brother and fraternal twin.

"Any stabbings are at Mouse's discretion," said Ameliah from the back of the group. Her tone was joking, but her patience was clearly wearing thin. She'd been enjoying herself immensely at Rain's expense for the past few days—her playful teasing paradoxically helping to keep him sane—but Legruz's latest strategy had clearly crossed a line with her. With Rain too, obviously, but there was a more serious situation to deal with first.

He turned his head minutely, reaching toward Ameliah without words. She instantly increased her pace, her soul taking on a serious feel as she slipped past the fledglings, then Pitterpatter. Her footsteps were utterly silent, cushioned by Airwalk just as his were—the two of them engaged in something of a competition. Almost in the blink of an eye, she was at the head of the column, ready to defend against the unknown signal. With Detection shared, she was just as able to feel it as he was.

"Legruz, silence, *please*," cut in Mora, alerted by Ameliah's motion. "Remember where we are. Is this the example you want to set for your apprentices?"

"But he has to tell me!" Legruz protested, probably not even having noticed Ameliah zipping past him. "By right of name, I demand an answer! I have been as patient as a painting! Speak, you! You face the wrath of my house!"

"Don't make threats if you can't follow through," Mora said, exasperated. "Your authority doesn't go that far, and you know it. By right of name? At this point, you're spitting on the dignity of that name."

"Hmph," Legruz said. "A Surone should not speak of dignity."

Mora snarled wordlessly and looked away with what appeared to be significant effort.

"You could try throwing a real tantrum," Leftbeard said, now walking beside Ameliah with his shield ready. "Screaming and kicking might work."

"I am happy with my strategy, thank you," Legruz said. He cleared his throat. "Where was I? Ah, yes. Tell me. Tell me. Tell me..."

"Mouse, PLEASE just tell him the name of the skill!" Genn shouted. "My ears are bleeding!"

"Tsk," Rain said.

The monster had heard that. Its random thrashing had become a sudden lurch in their direction.

Enough.

He stopped so suddenly that Pitterpatter actually crashed into him. He almost lost Airwalk from the impact, but his near-constant use over the past two days had increased his capability by leaps and bounds—which was entirely the point of the contest.

"You see?" Legruz said smugly over the cattipede's angry meow. "I win."

The Illuminator's expression turned to shock as Rain calmly turned and climbed the air to a dead stop at eye level.

"A—Airwalk?" Legruz stammered. "You have Airwalk? And you can stand still with it?! Amazing!"

"He's been using it to muffle his steps all day, oh observant one," Mora said, though she too sounded taken aback.

Rain ignored a momentary glimmer of pride, favoring his irritation. "I cannot answer your question without extreme danger to Tiger and myself, and by extension, to the people relying on us. I have told you this twice, and you have refused to listen, *twice*. This time makes three."

"And you have refused to tell me who those *people* even are."

"Yes," Rain said. "Suppose I agree to tell you all my little secrets even though you won't do the same. Promise me that you will never tell a soul."

"I swear it!" Legruz yelled, triumphant.

"Lie," Rain said. The rioting monster was seconds from fumbling its way into their tunnel, though it hadn't made a single sound. Thankfully, a ding sounded before Ameliah had to show anyone what real power looked like.

Your party has defeated Jelata Pride Hunter, Level 27

Your Contribution: >99%

5400 Experience Earned

"Ex-excuse me?!" Legruz spluttered, oblivious to the near-silent thud of the monster crumpling just outside their pool of light. "You dare doubt my words?"

"You did not mean your words," Rain said, relieved to be down to one problem. "Swear again."

"The impertinence! I swea—"

"Stop," Rain said softly, dismissing his helmet with Heavy Armor Inventory—something he'd actually yet to try out of the irrational fear of being unable to bring it back. Simply lifting his visor wouldn't do. Even this felt like too little. He wanted to crush the man with his domain, to use what Velika had shown him to batter the Illuminator into submission. With his ever-growing strength and Legruz's mysterious sensitivity, such a fumbling attempt at oversoul would probably even work. Fortunately, there was no risk of giving in to that temptation. The sight of his electric blue eyes was enough to stop the other man dead in his tracks.

"Consider what the oath *means*," Rain continued, his voice colder than Winter. "You tell no one. Ever. Neither for money nor threat of torture and death. You will take the secret to your *grave*. Picture yourself doing that, then swear."

"Fine, I shall humor you," Legruz said, but a heavy swallow belied his attempt at nonchalance.

"I swear that I will never reveal your secrets to anyone ever. Happy?"

Rain nodded. "You actually meant it. I'm impressed. And yet, what if I told you I'm not actually a mercenary, but an agent of house Dystolle? Would your oath hold? Don't bother answering. It is written all over your face that it would not. It *can* not. Words are nothing. Oaths are nothing. I fed you such an obvious lie, and your conviction fled like smoke in the wind. The you of this instant cannot swear for the you of the next. I will not tell you what the skill is or

what it does. I will not tell you who I am, what my mission is, or who is relying on me. You do not have to like it. You must simply accept it. If you can not, this is as far as you go."

"I— I— How dare—?"

"Now that's how you issue a threat," Leftbeard said. "I don't think I've ever seen him speechless before."

Rain resummoned his helmet, settling back to the floor and resuming his silent walk down the tunnel. "If you're coming, come. We've got a Jelata Pride Hunter to deal with."

"Fuck!" yelled Rightbeard, whirling. "That's a reaper!"

"To skin, I mean," Rain amended, having deliberately phrased his previous declaration for shock value after recognizing the name.

Genn quickly sent his Lunar Orb zipping forward, and the light soon washed over the monster's crumpled form. Despite the caustic darkness Rain had used to kill it, the blade-tailed lioness-looking thing seemed barely the worse for wear. Even if he hadn't read the relevant codex, that alone would have told him the value of its pelt.

"Marvelous!" Legruz shouted, apparently over his indignation. He began to clap, rising up in his saddle. "Magnificent! To best such a beast before any of us even realized we were in battle!"

"What are we even doing here, boss?" Leftbeard said. "This is silver shit."

"We're doing our job," Mora said with a resigned sigh. "We can't safely escort the esteemed Illuminator back to Threecore on our own, and we can't leave him unaccompanied, so what else is there to say? If he can't shut up, we're probably dead."

"I don't want to be dead," Genn said. "Nim, how did you get me into this?"

Nim didn't respond, huddled in uncomfortable silence with the other Fledglings. Only Letraue looked unbothered by the situation, but that was a front.

Rain felt immense empathy for them. He'd been there.

"Nobody is going to die," Ameliah said, touching Mora's shoulder. "Mouse wouldn't *actually* leave him, no matter how annoying he is, and we're certainly not going to leave anyone else. If he doesn't behave, we'll just...truss him like a goose for roasting and let Pitterpatter drag him the rest of the way. That okay with you, Pitterpatter?"

Pitterpatter meowed in indifference.

"Traitor!" Legruz yelled, swatting at the cattipede's ear, but Pitterpatter was too fast for him, easily flicking it out of the way.

"Thank you, Tiger," Mora said. "I appreciate that."

About an hour later—an hour of blessed silence—Rain raised a fist. “Halt. Fifteen minutes.”

Sighs of relief greeted this pronouncement, and he looked over his shoulder, catching Ameliah’s eye. Nodding, she walked past the others as they eagerly began shucking off their packs, collapsing to the ground.

“We have a problem,” Rain signed as she joined him, staring down the tunnel.

“The metal?” she signed back. “Yeah, that’s probably not good.”

Rain nodded, crouching down. He’d called the halt because of what Detection was telling him, not out of mercy for anyone’s sore feet. Metal was one of the things in his top-level sweep, and when detected, it triggered a deeper search for accolades, weapons, armor, coins, tools, and so forth. This was none of those things. It was just metal—a thumb-thick layer jacketing the tunnel at the edge of his range.

It wasn’t supposed to be there.

Having felt Mora approaching, Rain turned.

“What is it?” she signed.

“The tunnel ahead is plated with steel,” Rain signed back, recovering seamlessly from the shock. He felt vindicated in not having used the language for anything consequential until now. Just for...flirting with Ameliah..in the cheesiest way possible.

Shit.

"Slower," Mora signed back. "Bad except basics."

Rain nodded in relief, his cheeks heating all the same. "Tunnel ahead," he signed slowly, then tapped his armor. "Metal." He pressed a palm to the floor, then mimed doing so to the walls and ceiling before signing again. "Metal walls."

Nodding, Mora reached down to touch the stone as well, tapping a gouge left by what would have had to have been an enchanted pick. The wide tunnel they were in was quarried like most in the Great Delving, but hadn't been finished by a Geomancer, the tool marks in the deepstone remaining unweathered after who knew how long. Mora looked up and raised an eyebrow, clearly expecting an answer.

Rain tilted his head, confused, but Ameliah apparently understood the question.

"Yes, artificial," she signed. "Not natural. Smooth. Bolts."

Checking for bolts himself and finding them there, Rain frowned. He'd made what had felt like a pretty safe assumption—that the coating was artificial—but that *was* an assumption. Metal moss wouldn't even be that bizarre down here. The codex hadn't said anything about it, but—

"What are you three chattering about, all secret-like?" Leftbeard asked.

Rain looked up, seeing him approaching while the others fussed with their packs.

"Keep your voice down," Mora whispered. "We may have a situation."

Rain looked past Leftbeard, his jaw tightening. Genn and the fledglings hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, too tired to pay attention to anything other than themselves. Rightbeard was busy removing the saddle from Pitterpatter, but it wasn't Rightbeard he was worried about. Legruz was leaning against the many-limbed cat's side with his arms crossed. Sulking.

Good. Last thing I need is him getting involved until we know what this is.

Unbidden, Rain's lips twitched. Legruz's reaction to being denied Unity was amusingly similar to Dozer's. With how similar the two were, the funk would last perhaps the rest of the day.

Too late, he realized he hadn't muffled the king-link before thinking about the slime.

[Hello!] Dozer said, appearing with a pop.

"Shhh," Rain said, catching the slime and then mouthing the word 'sugar.' He would have mouthed 'shit,' but up close, Dozer's spatial hearing was good enough to read lips by motion alone. The slime deciding there was filth to be dealt with would do little to improve the situation.

"Know common hand code?" Ameliah signed to Leftbeard.

Leftbeard shook his head as he too crouched down.

"Someone's modified the tunnel ahead," Ameliah whispered, the four of them forming a line facing the darkness. "Coated it in metal."

"Ah," Leftbeard said, looking over his shoulder. "Foundry?"

"Probably," Mora said. "I guess they finally cracked down."

"Damn," Rain said, stroking Dozer. "What'll the toll be, do you think?"

"Entente and Foundry don't get along," Leftbeard said. "It will be more than I can afford."

"You won't be paying it," Mora said. "Legruz will." She glanced at Rain and Ameliah. "He might be hard to convince, though. Any chance you're willing to turn back? Just how time-critical is this job of yours?"

"Very," Ameliah said. "We'd have liked to be in Nadir yesterday. If not for our rivalry with the Guild, we'd have taken the main shaft and damn the toll."

"Anyone know another bypass?" Rain asked.

"Not that we can find without returning to the surface," Mora said.

"So be it," Rain said. "We'll just have to open our piggy banks."

"Legruz will pay," Mora repeated, not questioning the strange phrase. "You just have to finesse him."

"And if he won't?" Leftbeard asked. "If he only covers himself and his apprentices?"

Mora's expression twisted sour. "I'll draw on our defense allocation if I have to, but there'll be an inquiry."

"Blame Legruz."

"Oh, I will."

As one, Rain and Ameliah shot to their feet. "Party approaching," Rain said at full volume. "Fast."

[!] Dozer sent, rebounding gelatinously from his sudden elevator ride.

"Looks like somebody noticed we're here," Mora said, rising as well.

Leftbeard muttered a curse, calling for his brother as he hauled his shield into place.

"What's going on!?" called Legruz from behind.

Rain probably wouldn't have answered even if he'd had time, and he definitely did not. The signals—seven of them—had covered more than a hundred meters in a handful of seconds.

And ahead of them came their intent.

And so, it was with his surprise already discarded that Rain moved to engage what emerged from the darkness—the point of a spear, diving straight toward his throat.