

## 50: Baggage

*Ok, here we go. Please be better than the last time.*

Rain hesitated for a few more seconds, then grit his teeth and spent the required 10,000 experience to unlock tier 3 of Aura Metamagic. He waited, but the horrible nausea and disorientation didn't come. He only felt a quick flash of vertigo that thankfully didn't linger.

He sighed audibly.

"Nothing?" Jamus asked.

"Yeah. You were right. I still feel like my entire body is one giant bruise from the healing soulstrain, but I'm not going to puke everywhere. Looks like they're separate, like you said. It wasn't nearly as bad that time, either."

Jamus grinned. "There, you see? Your soul's already getting used to it."

"But why though?" Rain asked, resisting the temptation to search through the freshly unlocked tier 3 skills. That could wait. Jamus and Carten had returned late in the day with a wagonload of wood and the refilled water barrel. He wanted to get a good interrogation session in before the orange-robed mage called it a night. Jamus looked like a wilting marigold, his eyes drooping under his wrinkled orange hat.

Jamus sighed. "The soul is just like your body. Stats like Resistance define your limits. If you never take any damage, you'll never get tougher. Same with Strength and Focus. Just adding the points won't do it. In the case of your soul, the limit is your level."

"Makes sense I suppose. So I need to train my soul? Wait, stats don't take effect right away? The Strength ring instantly increased my max health—"

"Sorry, I might have been unclear. Yes, the points apply immediately, but it isn't that simple. Your health wasn't full, was it?"

Rain shook his head.

"The same sort of thing applies in general. Say you have 10 Strength and can lift something that weighs 3 gross."

"Wait, how much is a gross?"

"Not important," Jamus sighed, giving Rain a tired look. "You can lift a stone weighing 3 gross. Then you put on the ring, and your Strength is now 20. Can you now lift a stone twice the weight?"

Rain pondered, then shook his head. "I'm gonna go with 'no'."

"Correct. But then, say you train like a madman for a day. For a week, even. Then, you might find that yes, you can lift the stone. Except not really. Strength doesn't transfer to physical strength 1 to 1 like that, but it is a useful example."

"Damn. That kind of changes how the Imperial Auras will work."

"Yes and no," Jamus said. He yawned enormously. "Say you had your ring and you had trained until you could lift the stone. Then you take the ring off. You can't lift the stone now. But..."

Jamus paused, raising a finger. "When you put it on again, you could lift the stone right away. No training required. Your soul remembers."

"Oh, so if you're used to it, you can get the effect immediately?"

"Indeed," Jamus said.

"Well, that helps a bit, I guess. Still, I was hoping to be able to use an Imperial Nova. A bunch of mages all firing at once with an extra thousand focus would be devastating."

"I strongly suggest you never try such a thing. Their brains would explode into paste unless they had enough Arcane resistance to mitigate the effect. One thousand Focus is not a buff; it is an attack."

"Soulstrain again?"

"Yes."

"Damn it. What if I did it slowly? Could they get used to it over time?"

"Perhaps if they were high enough level... One thousand Focus is a ridiculous number, even for a Silverplate. A hundred, though..." Jamus stared into the campfire, considering.

Rain watched him. As fascinating as the older mage seemed to find the conversation, he looked like he was about to drop. Rain decided to show mercy. "Thanks, Jamus, I'll let you get some sleep."

Jamus sighed. "Probably for the best. I'm not as young as I used to be." He stood with another enormous yawn and went to retrieve his bedroll from his pack.

*I should ask about his past sometime. He's the oldest adventurer I've seen, except maybe Lavarro. He doesn't usually doesn't act like it though. He can't have been doing this his whole life...*

Rain sighed. The system really was unfair. He looked over at Ameliah where she was standing watch, having returned a little before Jamus and Carten.

*She said she could use Purify when she was 8 years old. With that big of a head start, no wonder she's so strong. Not that I'm envious or anything. I'm not one to talk. I had a level 18 blue dropped into my lap for crying out loud.*

Rain rubbed at his eyes. It was getting really late and he'd been doing his own training in the afternoon, though he stopped well short of Val's level of insanity. After the dark-skinned man had vomited, he'd somehow convinced Rain to let him keep going. He'd kept insisting he was fine up until he literally passed out on his feet.

*I can't believe I let him do that. I mean, I get where he's coming from, but still. He was capped for years, but there is such a thing as taking it too far. Yeah, my whole sensory deprivation training technique is up there on the insanity scale, but that's just boring as fuck, not physically painful. I hope he didn't give himself brain damage...*

Rain sighed. *Anyway, enough waiting. Tier 3, what wonders await?*

## Aura Metamagic

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### Tier 3

#### **Aura Compression** (0/10)

Compress aura output, reducing range to boost intensity

Increase intensity by 0.2% per meter of compression

Requires 50 ranks in Aura Metamagic

Requires 10 ranks in Aura IFF

### Tier 4

Locked

*Huh, there's only one new skill. Oh well. It's tier 3, so it should be pretty good. Let's see here. It would let me limit the range of auras if nothing else. That is something I really need, now that Immolate and Refrigerate are ranking up. I don't want to burninate the countryside, let alone the peasants. The factor on here is tiny, so at first glance, Compression seems pretty bad, but I'll need to do the math to be sure.*

*Man, I'm not going to sleep any time soon, am I? I need a test case. Winter is easy enough. With all buffs...*

Rain sunk into Aura Focus, pulling up the skill's description to check the numbers with everything maxed. He'd gotten pretty used to the sensory deprivation by now, so he didn't have any trouble staying seated without toppling off the log he was sitting on.

**Winter** (8/10) Exp: 2362/2900

Boost M.Regen by 1363% for all entities

Range: 76.7 meters

Cost: 432 mp/hr

He almost toppled over anyway as he saw the massive numbers displayed on the panel.

*Wow. I need to check this more often. 76.7 meters? Over a thousand percent? This is insane. Also, it feels really frigid now. I know it's in my head, but the feeling is totally getting stronger. It isn't really cold, though, it's like...the feeling of winter itself. The winter experience. Odd.*

*Anyway, Aura Compression. 76 meters of range, so that's  $1363\% * 0.2\% * 76\ldots$*

*I need that damn calculator.*

*I'm going to go ahead and guess that it's going to be broken as shit. I'd take it anyway, just for the ability to limit the range of an aura. He paused to yawn, his jaw creaking. I should try to sleep. I can work through the math later.*

He canceled Aura Focus and got up, using a brief burst of Purify to take care of his bladder. He dug his blanket out of his pack and cocooned himself near the fire. He activated Aura Focus, planning on using it to train Winter overnight. He let the feeling of winter seep into his bones as he multiplied sheep until he drifted off.

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Rain's alarm rang. He dismissed it and rolled over.

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A strange sensation startled Rain from his slumber and his eyes flicked open. The world remained black and silent.

*Oh, yeah.*

He canceled Aura Focus and his senses returned. He was hanging upside down from his ankles, explaining the origin of the odd signals from his inner ear that had woken him.

"I'm awake, Carten, you can put me down," he said. He struggled to free his head from his chainmail, which had slipped free from his belt and slid down to hang over his face.

Carten laughed and lowered him to the ground. Rain managed to free himself and then straightened his armor, securing it once more around his waist with the belt.

"Oh, that was just Rain. I thought it was going to be freezing today," Val said. He handed Rain a steaming hot bowl of stew.

*Wait, what? Freezing...oh. He's talking about Winter.* "What time is it?" Rain asked, accepting the stew gratefully.

"Midmorning," Ameliah answered. "We decided to let you sleep, but enough was enough."

Rain took a bite of the stew and moaned. *It's soooooooooo good!*

Jamus doffed his hat and took a bow. "See? I told you it was worth the wait."

When Ameliah had returned from hunting the day before, she'd been carrying a massive cow-like creature that she said was called an 'aoaka', pronounced 'aay-oooh-ahh-kaa'. It had been too late to have a proper supper, but Jamus had insisted on getting a few pieces butchered. He'd tossed them into the cauldron with some water and potatoes to simmer in the coals overnight. He'd refused to let anyone so much as taste it before they went to bed, saying it needed at least 8 hours to cook properly.

"Jamus, this is amazing," Rain said, shoveling the hot stew into his mouth.

"Thank you, thank you," Jamus said, grinning from ear to ear.

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "Jamus is a good cook."

Rain looked up to see that Tallheart had a bowl filled with some sort of porridge.

Jamus laughed. "Stop, Tallheart, you'll make me blush. And that's the last of the potatoes, so don't get your hopes up. There's not much I can do with rockmelons. Rockmelon stew? Ridiculous."

"How do you feel?" Ameliah asked, looking at Rain.

He swallowed and paused to consider. "Better. Still a little weak. We're not going back in today, are we?"

"We haven't decided," Val said. "Carten and I vote yes, Ameliah and Jamus vote no, and Tallheart doesn't count because he's not coming. We need you to break the tie."

Ameliah sighed and looked at Val. "You're not ready; you can barely stand. What did you do to yourself while I was gone?"

"For the last time, I'm fine," Val said.

"No, he's really not," Rain said. "Sorry, it's at least a little bit my fault. He's a mana junkie and I'm his dealer. I think I'm going to vote we wait another day. There's no rush. I've already got



what I need to get back into the city and then some. By the way, I'm not accepting any more Tel from any of you. Even split from now on. I insist."

"Well, you won't hear me complain," Jamus said. "We got over a thousand Tel from one run. I'm generous, but not that generous."

"We won't get even half that on the next run unless this lair regenerates ridiculously fast," Ameliah said.

"Right, which is why we should be goin' now," Carten said. "You said it regens faster when it's low, so I say, we keep hittin' it when it's down."

"True," Ameliah said, "but if we wait long enough, the Umbral Charger may respawn. Killing higher-level monsters gives better rewards, as a rule."

"Bah, fine," Val said. "You win. We'll sit on our asses. Come on Rain, let's go train."

Rain shook his head. "No way. I'm eating my stew, and *you* are taking it easy like Ameliah told you to. Jamus, what else is in here? Is that...pepper?"

"Yes," Jamus said. "I always make a point to keep some spices on hand."

Rain nodded. *That's as good of an opportunity to ask about his past as any.* "So, you were a cook or something, before you became an adventurer?"

"No, no, nothing like that. Cooking is just a hobby. I was a clerk working for the bank in Vestvall. That's a smaller city to the east of here, in case you weren't aware."

"Small is right," Val said. "I went through there once. Calling it a city is a little generous."

Jamus shrugged. "The bank has an office there, so it isn't as small as all that."

"So, you were a bank clerk?" Rain prompted.

Jamus nodded. "Yes. For over twenty years."

Carten whistled. "Twenty years... Sounds boring. I can see why you left."

Jamus shook his head. "I liked it. It was quiet, and it gave me plenty of time to read."

"So why did you leave then?" Val asked. "Did you luck out and find a blue or something?"

Jamus sighed. "Not many monsters involved in banking. No, I left before my awakening. I... needed to get away from my wife."

Carten laughed and punched Jamus on the shoulder. "Shit, Jamus, I never knew you used to be married."

"Technically, I still am," Jamus said, rubbing at his shoulder.

*Jamus sounds annoyed. Something must have happened. He doesn't strike me as the type to just walk out on someone.*

"What happened?" Val asked.

Jamus's voice was measured as he replied. "Well, I found out that none of my kids were actually mine. Things went downhill from there."

"Shit, Jamus," Carten said, laying an armored gauntlet on his shoulder. "Women, am I right? Can't trust a single one of em'."

"I'm sitting right here, you know," Ameliah said.

Carten looked at her. "Oh, not you of course. You know, other women. Most of em' are soft, untrustworthy, double-faced—"

"Carten?" Ameliah cut him off.

"Yeah?" He said, shrinking back as she fixed him with a flat look.

"Stop talking."

Val laughed. "Whatever chance you had with her, you just blew it."

"Aww, come on," Carten protested. "I didn't mean it like that. I was just tryin' to cheer up Jamus."

Ameliah sighed and shook her head. "Men."

"In Carten's place, I formally apologize on behalf of my gender. We're not all complete idiots, I swear," Rain said.

Ameliah smiled at him, then looked back at Jamus. "So, you left?"

"Yes," Jamus said. "As I saw it, I had two options. One: kill the bastard who stole my wife, then off myself; or Two: leave it all behind and start over. Obviously, I went with option two."

"And your wife?" Rain asked. "Your kids?"

"Still in Vestvall as far as I know. I still feel bad for leaving my children behind, even if they weren't actually mine. You don't just raise someone for years without becoming attached." Jamus sighed and shook his head. "They'll be fine. They're old enough. My wife took all my money too, so at least they won't have to worry about that."

"What? An' you just rolled over?" Carten said.

Jamus snorted. "I wouldn't say that. The cuckolding bastard has powerful connections. The entire city did nothing, even when I outed him in the public square."

"Jamus, that's terrible." Rain said.

"It's in the past. I'm an adventurer now. I never thought I'd make it this far, but here I am." He laughed. "Got a bit of a late start."

"Why not go back?" Val asked.

"Hmm?" Jamus raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Like you said, you're an adventurer now. A strong one, too, at least by the standards of Fel Sadanis. Why not go back and—"

"And what?" Jamus interrupted. "Kill him? Would that get me my wife back? My kids? No. That would just rip open the wound. I have no taste for vengeance, it is naught but ash."

"Well, Jamus, at least you've got us." Carten slapped him on the back. "Hey, by the way, did you dress like this back when you were a clerk?" He gestured to Jamus's brilliant orange robe. "Maybe that's why she cheated on ya?"

Jamus snorted. "Ha. Thanks, Carten. I needed a laugh." He got to his feet and dusted off his robes. "Come on Tallheart. I've got a project for you. Don't worry, it won't take long."

Tallheart got up from where he had been sitting silently since he'd finished his potato porridge.

"Jamus," Rain said. The man paused, raising an eyebrow at him. "Thanks for telling us about your history. I'm sorry, it sounds pretty shitty."

Jamus smiled. "Like I said. It's in the past. I like to think of myself as a new man. Right now, this new man needs a griddle. Let's go, Tallheart, I need some hammering done."

Rain looked down at his knees as the pair walked away. *That really fucking sucks. I can't believe something like that happened to Jamus.*

"Wow," Carten said. "He's a better man than me. I'd ah killed the fuck." Ameliah shook her head. Carten rounded on her. "Oh? And what would you of done?"

Ameliah sighed. "I don't know. I...probably would have left too."

"Bah," Carten said, clambering to his feet.

"Just killing anyone who crosses you isn't the solution, Carten," Rain said.

"Sure would make me feel better," Carten grouched. He sighed. "Don't worry, Rain, I'm not some bloodthirsty murderer. I only kill them that needs killin'"

"Where I come from, killing is always wrong," Rain said. "People will justify it in war, or as a capital punishment or something, but it's still wrong. If Jamus killed a man for sleeping with his wife, he'd be locked up in a prison."

"I agree with you, Rain," Ameliah said. "It is better not to kill, if you can. But you won't always have a choice."

Rain shook his head. "There's always a choice."

Val scoffed. "Not out here. You're being naive. Out here, bad shit happens, and if you're strong enough to survive, you survive. That sometimes means bashing the other guy's head in...or in my case, blasting a hole straight between his eyes. Say a group of renegades caught us unawares in the night and put a knife to your throat? Would you—"

"Ha, ain't no way that'd happen," said Carten. "We ain't some pathetic—"

"Just, hypothetically, Carten," said Val, glaring at him. "Would you—"

"Hypo-what?" The big man scratched at his beard.

"Gods!" Val glared at him. "It means 'for the sake of argument!'" He looked back at Rain.

"Would you let that bandit cut your throat—would you let him kill me—kill us—just to hold onto your values?"

Rain sighed. "Well no, but I wouldn't—I mean, I'd negotiate with him, or knock him out so we could run...or something..." His voice trailed off. *I sound like an idiot.*

"Something?" Val said. "What something? What if someone was going to kill everyone in a village, but you could stop them? One death to save hundreds? Thousands? Wouldn't killing them to prevent it be better than doing nothing?"

Rain looked at his feet. *I...don't know. In that situation...he's got a point. It's not like I can just call the police...hell, the police kill people all the time. Not that that's a good thing...*

"I guess I've never had to think about it like this before," he said finally. "I've never been in a kill or be killed situation, not against another human, anyway."

"And that's the problem," said Val. "You're level eighteen, but you've gone through less than half of the bad shit most people go through just to make it to level ten. You're idealistic and far, far too soft."

Rain struggled to keep his face from reddening. *I suppose it'll happen at some point. I'll have to turn someone into an icicle, or Velocity them right off of a cliff.* "So, what would you do, Val? Just kill them without thinking?"

Before Val could respond, Ameliah cut him off. "You just do the best you can, Rain," Ameliah said. "That's all any of us can do."

Rain sighed. "I know."

"You'll learn how the world really works eventually," Val said. He stood with a sigh. "Well, if we're done with philosophy and we're not training, what are we doing?"

"Someone needs to finish cleaning the aoaka," Ameliah said.

"I'll help," Rain said. "I don't really know what I'm doing, though. Where I'm from, meat comes from a store wrapped up in *plastic*."

"I'll show you," Ameliah said.

"I suppose I'll help as well," Val said. "That thing is enormous. I could find a use for the hide." He gestured to his jacket. The hastily stitched-together seams were starting to rip open again.

"How are we going to preserve it?" Rain asked. "I could make another refrigerator pit..."

"We'll dry and smoke it," Ameliah said. "What's a *refrigerator*?"

Rain shrugged. "Icebox? Do you have those? It's like that, but without the ice."

"How does it work? Not your pit, the real thing," Val said.

"I...don't actually know," Rain said. "No magic. They run on...lightning. Now that you mention it, I suppose what I made back in Tallheart's clearing was closer to an icebox than it was to a fridge. I think it has something to do with compressing air?"

Ameliah smiled. "Let's stick with smoking."