

1: Woodland

Rain scrunched up his eyes and tried to worm his way deeper into the covers. It was way too early to get up in his book. He grumbled in annoyance as something hard pressed into his neck. Still more than half asleep, he idly wondered what the offending object was. It didn't feel like anything that was likely to be in his bed. As he became more aware, he quickly noticed that a few things were not quite right with the whole situation.

Blinking open his eyes, he realized several things in short order. First, he wasn't in his bed. Second, he wasn't in his apartment. Third, he was dreaming, because there wasn't a forest anything like this anywhere near the city.

A root? He thought, sitting up and looking at the rough gnarl of wood that he had been using as a pillow. Can't I dream up a better place to sleep? Also, why am I not awake now, usually once I realize it is a dream I just wake up.

Blurily, Rain examined his surroundings for anything of interest. The forest looked, well, it looked like a forest. Trees, rocks, grass, birds chirping, pretty standard stuff. No giant mushrooms or smoking caterpillars to prove the unreality of the situation.

Yup, I'm in a forest. Just go with it I guess. Hey, if I'm dreaming, does that mean I can control things?

Climbing to his feet and wincing at the crick in his neck, Rain looked around, then up. Raising his hands, he tried as hard as he could to will himself into the air.

Come on! Fly! Up! Happy Thoughts!

Seeing that he was going nowhere, Rain closed his eyes and tried to believe, actually believe, that he could fly. He felt a soft breeze brush past his face and he excitedly opened his eyes.

Damn it!

He was still standing where he started, holding his hands up to the sky in a superhero pose but looking more like an escapee from an asylum. His short brown hair was matted and sticking up in the back where his head had been lying against his oaken pillow. It was also a bit dirty and dusty, but thankfully free from twigs and leaves. He shivered as the breeze which had fooled him into thinking he had achieved takeoff cut through his pajamas. Looking down and sighing, he noticed a squirrel watching him from a stump. It chattered at his sudden movement.

“Yeah, yeah, keep laughing,” he said, glaring at the squirrel. The squirrel chattered again, then jumped across to a tree and climbed its way up and around the back of the trunk before re-emerging on top of a branch. Rain idly watched the squirrel and rubbed his arms as he tried to come to grips with his situation.

OK, so not a dream. I'm cold, my neck hurts, the squirrel is mocking me, and I can't fly. Yeah, not my idea of a fun lucid dream. So, if I'm not dreaming, and I'm not in my house, then how the hell did I get here? I went to bed, fell asleep and then...someone broke into my apartment, drugged me, dragged me

down three flights of stairs, shoved me into a car, drove hundreds of miles, dumped me in a forest, then peaced out? Yeah, don't think so. Though as pranks go, absolutely legendary.

...

“Hello?”

Obviously, the squirrel didn't answer. Rain shivered again; it wasn't that cold, but the air did have a definite chill. A white undershirt with a pair of plaid cotton pajama pants wasn't exactly the ideal outfit for traipsing around an old-growth forest.

Right, so not dreaming, not being punked, what does that leave? Insane? Abducted by aliens? Trapped in VR? Wait, no, VR sucks, we don't have tech like that. If we did, I wouldn't be working construction, we would probably have robots doing it or something.

“Summoned! To another world!” Rain shouted. The squirrel gave him a contemptuous look, then jumped to another tree to get away from the crazy person.

Yeah right. Shit, if I am being punked, I'll never live that down. Smile for the camera!

Rain looked around. There wasn't much underbrush; there was nothing but trees and the odd rock in every direction. No sign of civilization, people, or a camera crew. Other than the quiet chirping of birds, there was no sound of traffic nor murmur of the city. There was no smog in the air nor glare of streetlights. There was only wild, untamed nature lit by the rays of the early morning sun.

...

“Shit.”

Rain sat down hard, leaning against the tree whose roots he had been using as a pillow. He sat there for several minutes, trying to work through the reality of his new situation. As his thoughts looped back on themselves, he started to get more and more concerned.

This wasn't a dream. He wasn't going to wake up. Regardless of how he had gotten there, he was alone, in the middle of a forest, in his pajamas. He sat under the tree, rubbing his arms against the chill as the sounds of the forest washed over him. After what seemed like hours, but in reality was only ten minutes, he climbed back to his feet.

OK, panic later. Shelter, water, food, and in that order.

Having nothing to take with him, Rain looked around, picked a direction, and started walking. Looking at the sun, he decided on south and kept it to his left as he picked his way through the trees. Luckily, the ground was clear and loamy, so his lack of shoes was an annoyance and not any real impediment.

Rain pondered his situation as he walked, scanning the forest for anything that looked like a sheltered cluster of trees, a cave, or maybe a motel. He continued like this for a few hours, stopping occasionally to lean against a tree and panic a bit. He would then move on only to stop and cower at the cry of some terrifying animal.

The cry had repeated several times. In the end, it turned out to have been a honey badger. Luckily, it didn't give a shit about him and let him pass. Rain was starting to get tired and a bit thirsty when he noticed that the trees were thinning out ahead. He picked up his pace and broke through onto a dirt road cutting through the forest.

He sank to his knees and closed his eyes. Roads meant civilization. And civilization meant that a motel was looking a bit more likely than a cave after all.

Rain rested for a few minutes before clambering back to his feet and looking down the road. He couldn't see anything in either direction. Shrugging, he turned left and started walking.

Left is right! Onwards! Rain thought to himself, trying to stay positive.

He hadn't been walking for more than fifteen minutes or so before he heard something in the distance. There was a curve in the road ahead, so he couldn't see the source, but he heard what sounded like a person whistling. Rain started jogging toward the sound, trying to ignore the pain in his feet from his long journey through the wilderness. As he got closer, he heard an angry shout, and the whistling cut off. That was followed by the sound of voices arguing with each other, but he couldn't make out the words, though he could hear them clearly.

What language is that? It doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard...

He stopped suddenly as a figure rounded the bend. The man was looking over his shoulder, shouting at someone, presumably the whistler. He was wearing a brown shirt and brown pants and looked a bit rough, but otherwise normal enough other than the bow and quiver of arrows. That was a bit odd.

Rain stayed quiet, not wanting to surprise the man by hailing him. He waited for him to return his eyes to the road instead. When the man did turn back, he immediately spotted Rain and came to a sudden stop. He said something loudly to his companions, who followed quickly around the bend at his call.

The man drew an arrow and nocked it, but didn't raise his bow. Stopping at least 20 meters from Rain, he raised his voice and asked something that sounded like a question. His three companions stood behind him, but Rain couldn't take his eyes off the bow.

"Um, hello?" Rain said.

The man's face furrowed in confusion. Looking at a red-haired man to his left, who Rain noted was wearing a brown bathrobe, he said something in the same unintelligible language. The other man simply shrugged.

"Hey, um, so I don't know what language that is, do any of you know English?"

The archer said nothing, watching Rain over his hooked nose while the third man gestured and spoke loudly to the others. The last member of the party was a blonde woman with a large pack. Actually, large didn't do it justice. This was an *absolute unit* of a pack. She wasn't participating in the conversation, standing to one side and examining Rain with a strange expression on her face. The loud man seemed to reach some decision, barking an order to the archer and pushing him aside to stalk towards Rain.

Uh-oh, I might be in trouble here.

As the man drew closer, Rain examined him, weighing his options.

Brown pants, brown shirt, brown vest, and...sword. And he has drawn the sword. And he is yelling at me.

Rain raised his hands and tried to look as non-threatening as possible. It wasn't hard, in his pajamas.

Running isn't an option, they have shoes and I don't. Look, see, I'm nice, please don't kill me.

The man stopped a few meters away and stared at Rain. He repeated the same question the hook-nosed man had asked before, but Rain just shook his head and shrugged. He let his hands fall slightly but kept them where the man could see them. The man snorted, then shouted over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off Rain. The rest of the party approached, except the woman, who walked over to the side of the road and started taking off her pack. She grabbed an axe that was hanging from her belt and then started hacking at some of the nearby brush. It looked to Rain like she was clearing a space for something, but before he could wonder about that the man facing him barked an order at him. The man was pointing at the ground and watching Rain with an expectant look.

Rain stopped himself from asking a question. *He doesn't understand me, no point in responding. Let's see, that is probably either 'stay there' or 'sit down'. The fact that he is still staring at me means...*

Rain sat. Nodding, the man walked back to his companions. It was clear now that the woman was setting up a campsite. She was piling bits of dead wood into what looked like the beginnings of a fire. The man with the bathrobe (*well, probably just a robe, it doesn't seem like any of them had ever heard of a bath*) was gesturing at him and arguing with the man with the bow. The man with the sword ignored them both. He moved to the pack the woman had set down and started digging around in it. *How the hell was she carrying that huge thing? It must weigh a hundred kilos! She just looks like a regular person, not she-hulk.*

The man had apparently found what he was looking for as he was walking back towards Rain. He had a coil of rope in his hands.

I was hoping for a canteen of water.. Yup, I'm totally getting tied up by fantasy bandits in a forest. This...is not how I saw my Tuesday going.

Rain sat by the fire with his hands bound behind his back. Other than tying his hands, the bandits, if that is what they were, had ignored him for the most part. They were talking among themselves in their strange, staccato language.

He wasn't able to understand what they were saying, but he thought that the wiry man with the sword and the dark hair was the leader. His name was Hegar or something like that. Or, at least, maybe that was his name. It could have been a title like 'boss' or 'chief' for all Rain knew. He seemed to respond to it at any rate.

The lanky man with the robe gave Rain quite a shock as soon as the woman finished setting up the kindling for the fire. He suddenly barked a word, made a series of gestures, then pointed at the pile of dry sticks. As prepared as he was by a diet of hundreds of fantasy novels, TV shows, and movies, Rain was still surprised when a bolt of fire shot from the man's hands towards the pile. It hit with a blast of heat, causing the wood to burst into flames.

Luckily, Rain wasn't the only one to let out a manly exclamation of excitement. Hegar had been close to the fire at the time, and his deep bass bellow drowned out Rain's shriek as he batted at the hem of his pant-leg. Surprisingly, other than a long string of what Rain assumed to be expletives, there were no repercussions for the robed man. Rain decided he was going to call the man a mage, rather than a wizard. The robe was brown, after all, not blue with yellow stars. After that brief excitement, the red-haired mage had settled against a tree and promptly fell asleep.

The man with the bow had disappeared down the road almost immediately, hunting, apparently, as he came back with a pair of rabbits in short order. That was awfully fast to track and shoot the rabbits, so the man was either really good or really lucky. He had quickly cleaned them, then speared them on skewers over the fire. He had given the mage a kick as he returned to the camp, but the slumbering man just rolled over and ignored him.

The woman moved efficiently around the campsite, collecting wood and clearing a space for everyone to sit without getting covered in brambles. She barely spoke despite Hegar's constant nattering at her. Hegar kept pointing and gesturing, indicating where he wanted the fire, logs for sitting, the pack, and so forth. She was ignoring his requests for the most part, though she did help him move a log when it looked like he was going to hurt himself. The ease with which she lifted the huge tree trunk shocked Rain even more than the mage's trick with the fire.

Rain found himself admiring her stoic resistance to Hegar's antics quite a bit. Despite the absurd strength, she seemed the most normal of the four. Granted, that wasn't hard when the competition was a lazy pyromaniac, a micromanager, and an archer entirely too fond of blood. Watching the man skin the rabbits with a wicked grin on his face hadn't been pleasant. Not at all.

Eventually, the rabbits were deemed sufficiently cooked and shared out to the four bandits. Funny how the mage woke up as soon as the archer pulled them off the fire.

“Hey!” Rain called out.

The three men ignored him, but the woman glanced in his direction, seeming to consider for a moment. She made to rip off another serving of meat, but Hegar stopped her with a shake of his head and a few words. The woman frowned, but nodded. She set her rabbit aside, grabbed a tin cup from her bag, filled it with water from a skin, and walked over to him. Rain sighed with relief as she held the cup up to his lips for him to drink.

“Ahhh, thank you,” he said, as she lowered the cup. She nodded, then brushed a strand of her blond hair away from her face and walked back over to the fire to resume her meal.

Hegar says no rabbit for the captive. Got it, he is a total ass. Not that I'm hungry after watching bow freak lick his knife like that. That isn't sanitary.

Suddenly, all five of the people around the fire froze as a rustle came from the forest behind where Rain was sitting. Looking over his shoulder, Rain let out a yelp as he saw a pair of eyes staring at him. Scrambling away as best as he could with his hands bound, he watched in horror as a gigantic wolf prowled into the clearing. The thing was larger than any natural wolf had a right to be. It was gray, shaggy, and built like an angry refrigerator.

Hegar shouted loudly and leaped over the fire, drew his sword and placed himself in front of the monster. He sent several lightning-fast jabs at its snout, but the wolf-thing jumped back with supernatural speed. Hegar fell into a dueling stance, standing side-on to the creature, his sword extended with his offhand held above his head. The archer and mage scrambled to their feet to support their leader. The woman stood in the back calmly with no visible weapon, watching as the wolf growled and stalked back towards her companions.

The mage made a gesture and shouted. It was the same one he had used before. A bolt of fire shot towards the wolf. The flaming missile struck the wolf in the eye, and it roared and snapped in rage, ignoring Hegar's sword and rushing for the mage. The archer shot an arrow at its side where it stuck quivering, but it didn't seem to slow the wolf down at all. The mage shrieked and tripped, saved by chance as the wolf's leaping lunge for his throat missed. The wolf landed next to the woman, who stepped back calmly. Rain was half expecting her to just suplex the damn thing, but it looked like she wasn't going to get involved in the fight.

The wolf howled in rage, clawing at its burning face. Hegar took advantage of its pain, leaping to stab it in the back and simultaneously getting in the way of a shot from the archer, who cursed and jerked his bow to the side at the last moment. Hegar shouted something and his blade blurred before sinking deep into the beast's back.

What was that? That wasn't just a normal thrust.

Rain's stumbling mind had locked onto the glow that had surrounded the man's blade as it seemed to be drawn directly towards the beast's pelt. Rain laboriously pulled himself to his feet and stumbled away as the wolf howled in agony. An arrow took it in its un-burnt eye as it whirled to face its attacker, and, blinded, it opened its jaws to howl in rage. A second arrow followed the first, lodging itself in the back of its throat after passing through its wide open mouth. Like a puppet with its strings cut, the wolf collapsed to the ground.

Rain gasped, panting as the beast fell. He hadn't even had time to realize it was dead when, without warning, a brilliant blue box popped up in his vision.

Your party has defeated [\[Musk Wolf\]](#), Level 18
Your Contribution: <1%
103 Experience Earned
Level Up

Ah, so that is how it is. Cool, Rain thought, then decided to have a nice lie down.

2: One on One

Rain goggled at the box hovering in his vision. He had fallen to the ground when the wolf died and the message appeared. He had been feeling more and more like this world was some sort of game or copy of modern fantasy culture. Having it confirmed so blatantly was quite unexpected.

So I'm in a game? He breathed in the scent of blood and death and gagged. *Way too real to be a game, and yet, this thing...*

The dialog was hovering in the center of his field of view, moving with his eyes. It was making it a bit difficult to focus on the world with it hanging there. Also, it was shattering his assumptions about reality.

OK, level up, got it, now... Dismiss! Close! OK! Well, this is annoying.

“OK Close. Dismiss.”

Bah.

Rain pulled his bound hands down underneath himself and, with some struggling, managed to get them in front of him. The rope wasn't too tight, but it wasn't exactly pleasant. He swiped at the dialog with his bound hands. To his surprise, it moved with his touch, as if he was dismissing an app on his phone, sliding to the left and out of view. Even more interesting, the panel seemed like it had an actual physical form. It felt like glass, but somehow electric and fuzzy. Rain didn't know quite what to make of the feeling. At least he could see now.

OK, so I leveled up and got a message telling me about it. I can dismiss the message, but I need to touch it to do so.

Hegar was looking a bit worse for wear, panting heavily. The mage also seemed like he had seen better days. He was sitting down with his eyes closed and was massaging his temples. Rain couldn't see the woman or the archer, but he assumed they were nearby. Nobody seemed to be paying attention to him.

If I was gonna run, this would be the time. I could probably find a sharp rock or something and cut these ropes, but... Yeah, they would totally catch me. Plus, I keep calling them bandits, but I'm not sure they are actually. Maybe...adventurers? I mean, they look shady as shit, but who am I to judge. I don't know anything about the culture here. Maybe brown is the height of fashion... OK, probably not.

Rain looked around again and, satisfied that he wasn't being watched, scooted back so he could lean against a tree. Hegar glanced up but didn't do anything to stop him. Instead, he moved towards the wolf. Drawing a knife from his belt, he started butchering the animal. Rain's stomach flopped around unpleasantly and he decided to find something to distract himself.

Status, Rain thought, as hard as he could.

Damn, nothing happened. How about...Inventory...Skills...Character...Menu.

“Shit!” His entire field of vision was suddenly filled with blue. A panel was hanging before him, much larger than the dialog, listing out several options in the top left corner, but otherwise blank. Getting over his shock, Rain took a closer look.

Attributes (+20)
Skills (+2)
Statistics
Options

OK, Attributes.

The panel disappeared, replaced by another one listing what looked like a character sheet.

Attributes
Richmond Rain Stroudwater
Level 1
Experience: 3/100
Unclassed

| | |
|---------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Strength | 10 (+) |
| Recovery | 10 (+) |
| Endurance | 10 (+) |
| Vigor | 10 (+) |
| Focus | 10 (+) |
| Clarity | 10 (+) |

| | |
|-------------|----|
| Free Points | 20 |
|-------------|----|

OK, so I'm pretty generic. Level 1? So I guess I started at zero? 10 points per level, and a base level of 10 for each stat? Wait, so if I put 10 points in strength, does that mean I'll be twice as strong? I mean, that sounds pretty good, but I don't think it can work like that; otherwise, everyone would be able to bench press a tractor trailer. And what the heck are these other stats? Recovery? Of health, or is that everything? What the heck does Vigor do then? Maybe I should put some points in clarity, because this is pretty fucking cryptic. What happened to dexterity, intelligence, and constitution?

Rain sighed and stared at the numbers. I can't put points in these, not until I know what they do. I have these guys to protect me, so it isn't like I'll die out here without the stats, so I can wait. I don't want to do something I might regret...

Damn it, James was right, I am a hopeless min-maxer.

Thinking of his friend from college and the DnD campaign they had both played in, his mouth quirked up into a half smile. Maybe it was the adrenaline, but Rain wasn't thinking too hard about his reality at the moment. Instead, he wondered what James would have said about this character sheet. James played bards. Always bards, ever since high school. *No charisma in this world, eh? Too OP?*

His smile fell as he recalled the ending of that particular campaign. His character had died of poison as the rest of the party tried desperately to save him. It had been a bad time for Rain. His father had died at the start of the semester and he had decided to drop out to help support his mother. He had stuck around for this last session of the campaign, only for his character to fall in the final battle. The next day, he packed up his car and returned home, finding a job in construction. He hadn't kept in touch with James or any of his other friends. His mother had died a few years later and long hours and mild depression had caused him to withdraw from most human contact. It was only in the past few weeks or so that he had decided to claw himself out of the hole he had dug.

I guess I don't need to go to the gym now... ha. Fantasy world, experience, levels. Who needs cardio?

Rain looked down at his slightly pudgy gut. *I wonder. If I put points in strength, will I hulk out? Question for later. Damn it, why can't everyone just speak the same language like in every science fiction show ever? That guy can throw fireballs, but doesn't know a translation spell? Another question for later: Translation spell, is it a thing? Oh, maybe I can check.*

*Back. Dismiss. **Menu**. Ah, there it goes, ok, **Skills**. Great, I can go direct. Let's see here.*

Skills

-

Free Skill Points: 2

-

Fencing | Physical Utility | Physical Passive | Fire Casting | < | > |

*Not a lot here, umm **Fencing**.*

Fencing

Tier 0

Counter 0/10 (+)

+5% damage after blocking (str)

Thrust 0/10 (+)

Stab forwards

Deal 5-7 damage on hit (str)

Cost: 5 st

Tier 1

Locked

*Ah, I see, so these are categories. Humm. **Physical Utility.***

Physical Utility

Tier 0

Strength of Arm 0/10 (+)

Increase physical strength by 2% (str)

Lifespring 0/10 (+)

Increase health regeneration by 10% (str)

Rugged Defense 0/10 (+)

Increase physical resistance by 2% (end)

Tier 1

Locked

*What does that (str) mean? Skills governed by strength? So (end) would be endurance then? Wait, shouldn't that lifespring thing be recovery? (rec)? Maybe it is something else. Need more data. **Fire Casting.***

Fire Casting

Tier 0

Firebolt 0/10 (+)

A bolt of magical fire assails your target

Deal 6-8 heat dmg (fcs) on hit

10m range

Cost: 10 mp

Tier 1

Locked

Only one spell? Well, it seems pretty good assuming that is what mageman over there was using. More damage than the sword thrust, don't need a sword, ranged, sets things on fire. Who would ever want to use a sword when you can throw fire? Damn it, distracted again. (fcs), that must be focus. So focus makes magic stronger, strength makes physical skills stronger, endurance is...defense?

Rain flicked through several more tabs of the display, using the arrows to browse through the list. There were quite a few tabs, and he quickly got lost in the sea of options. He saw many skills governed by strength, endurance, and focus, but nothing for recovery, vigor, and clarity.

*I guess they are support stats? Judging by the layout, recovery goes with strength, so health regen probably. Vigor goes with endurance, stamina recovery, makes sense I guess. That leaves focus and clarity. Yes, it is all clear now...yeah right. Oh, maybe I should see if there is some sort of help menu. Help. Damn it. **Menu**.*

Everything closed.

*Help. Damn, nothing. **Menu**, ok, now Help! Damn it, still nothing. **Menu**.*

With all screens closed, Rain sighed and leaned back against the tree. He rubbed his eyes, wincing at the start of a headache. It had been an insane day of disorientation, walking, terror, more walking, and now overwhelming questions about the nature of reality. Worst of all, he hadn't had a coffee in something like half a day and the caffeine withdrawal was starting to kick in.

He yawned. I'll save my points for now. I need to know what the stats do, not just guesses. And I need to know how skills work. Like, if I put a point in firebolt, do I just magically know how to cast it? Arrrrrrgh, how is this bothering me more than the GIANT FUCKING WOLF that just attacked me?

Looking over at Hegar, he saw that he had managed to remove the wolf's pelt. He was currently arguing with the archer, who had returned at some point. The object of the argument seemed to be a huge, ragged slab of meat Hegar was holding in his hand while he gestured at the fire. Apparently, Hegar thought musk wolf made for good eating, but the archer disagreed. Mid-sentence, the archer cut off and tilted his head, then looked out to the road, narrowing his eyes. Rain followed his gaze and started searching the treeline across the road for whatever had caught his attention.

Shit, don't tell me... Wolves hunt in packs.

Suddenly, the archer snorted and looked away. While he was distracted, Hegar had managed to impale the slab of meat on a skewer and propped it over the fire. He grinned at the archer, hands on his hips proudly, despite being covered in the wolf's blood. The bucket of water that the woman dumped over his head took him completely by surprise. He hollered as the archer bent over, laughing and gasping for air. The woman just smiled and threw a cloth at Hegar, who decided to be a good sport and sighed, rubbing at his clothes with the rag. It looked more like he was spreading out the bloody stains, not

actually removing them. Suddenly, Rain heard something that could only be described as a *splortch*. He jumped and snapped his gaze back to the road. Something had wandered out of the trees and was squelching its way towards them.

A slime? I thought they were supposed to be cute. That thing looks like a giant clump of congealed snot. White with yellow streaks, blech. Slimes are supposed to be green!

Hegar was watching the progress of the slime with mild interest. The archer didn't even glance over at it; instead, he was trying to start a conversation with the woman, who was resolutely ignoring him. The mage was nowhere to be seen.

Rain backed away, trying to edge around the fire so the bandits were between him and the slime. Hegar glanced at him, then poked the archer, who whirled around and demanded something in an annoyed tone. Hegar pointed at the slime. The archer snorted and wandered away. The woman shook her head.

Hegar sighed, then peered around the clearing. Apparently, he didn't see what he was looking for, as he bellowed a word at the top of his lungs. From the lack of reaction of the others, he assumed this to be the name of the missing mage.

Yeah, come on Brovose, where are you? We need you to burn this nasty booger.

Hegar shouted again, but there was no response. He stomped his foot and cursed.

Hey, at least I'm learning to swear from these guys. This thing can't be much of a threat. I think Hegar just doesn't want to deal with it himself.

Wearily, Hegar unsheathed his sword and looked at the slime, then the woman. She shook her head and Hegar sighed, turning to face the slime. Then, he stopped and looked directly at Rain.

No. Oh no no. Rain held up his bound hands and shook his head.

“No. No way.”

Hegar grinned and replied with what Rain assumed was ‘Yes way’ and started stalking towards him. Rain started to back away, but tripped over something, falling hard to the ground. Hegar snorted, and with a flick of his sword cut the rope binding Rain's hands. Rain gulped.

Well that was fucking terrifying. He could gut me like a fish.

Hegar gestured at the slime, which was almost upon them, then stepped back behind Rain. Hoisting him to his feet, he gave him a push towards the slime, which Rain now saw was actually more interested in the bloody ground near the wolf's remains than the humans in the camp.

“Can I use your sword, or...yeah, didn't think so,” Rain said despondently. Looking around, he spotted a sturdy branch over at the side of the clearing. Hegar watched him patiently. Picking up the branch, he gave it a few swings.

Ok, slime, time to get splatted.

Rain walked towards the slime, his branch held in front of him defensively. The slime was about the size of a large dog but had no other defining features. It was starting to take on a somewhat red tinge as it fed on the blood of the wolf. Somehow, it seemed to detect Rain's approach, as it quivered, then leaped at him. Screaming, Rain swung his branch like a bat and felt it make contact with the putrid mass. Instead of flying off into the outfield, the section of the blob that he hit splattered everywhere, some of it landing in Rain's mouth.

“Urk, Gaaahah,” Rain spluttered and spat, backpedaling. His hit had killed the slime's momentum and it looked like it had done some damage, but it wasn't without cost. It felt like someone had dumped a bin of used diapers over him. Clumps of disgusting sludge were dripping down his face and plopping onto the ground. As he coughed and spluttered, the sound of raucous laughter reached his ears. He made out three distinct male voices gasping and wheezing in merriment.

Great, the mage is back. Fuck you, mage. Attacking a slime with a stick, I feel like such a moron. Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.

Having cleared his eyes, Rain tried not to think about the putrid taste in his mouth and eyed his opponent. The slime had drawn back and was sloshing side to side. It recovered and started moving towards him again. Rain walked backward, staying out of the range that it was able to leap. The slime continued to follow sedately as Rain walked toward the fire.

Not too bright, are you? Rain thought, holding the end of his log in the flames until it caught. Whatever the slime was, it seemed to be flammable. The flames took to the slime coating the wood quickly and started to spread towards his hand.

“Shit!” Rain swore. *I'm covered in this stuff!*

He lobbed the burning branch at the slime and, to his own amazement, hit it dead center. The slime lit up immediately and then started bubbling. Rain heard a curse from behind him, but before he could do anything the slime exploded, sending chunks of burning goo flying all over the camp. He dove backward, then rolled over, trying to smother the drops of burning sludge that had landed on him before. He writhed in the dirt, trying to bat out the chunky lumps of goo and having moderate success. He was aided by the fact that the goo burned quickly, almost too quickly to set his clothing on fire. Soon, all that was left was the odd clump that had somehow escaped the blaze, as well as a smell that defied description.

Rain panted and spat, then looked angrily for Hegar. He was shocked to see that three of the figures were protected by a bluish magic field which dropped as he watched, revealing them to be unharmed. Brovose lowered his hands and laughed, not looking at Rain but instead at Hegar, who Rain saw was in just as bad of a state as himself. He wasn't on fire but his face was beet red and he was screaming at Brovose as he gagged and spluttered.

Thank you Brovose! You may have saved my life with that stunt. Yes, yes, yell at the mage, forget about the idiot who detonated a fatberg all over your camp.

Rain was distracted by the sudden appearance of a dialog in his vision.

Your party has defeated [Slime], Level 1
Your Contribution: 99%
23 Experience Earned

Level 1 slime. Not a Dire Dumpster Slime or a Putrid Pustule or anything. Just a regular old slime.
Rain thought, dismissing the dialog, then clawing futilely at the oily, lumpy mess covering him. *I will never be clean again.*

No sooner than he thought this, the slime started to dry out and flake off, dissolving into motes of dust even before it hit the ground. The smell also started to fade as the mess in the camp dissolved into thin air. There was a faint white glow in the air, pulsing in intensity. Looking for the origin, he noticed that the woman had her eyes closed and arms spread. The glow was emanating from her body and washing away the filth as if it had never been. The pulses of light built on her skin before silently breaking away, diffusing outwards in a sphere. The light drifted through the clearing like a pale, luminous fog, curling around objects it encountered and rolling along the ground in eddying waves. It faded away after having traveled several meters beyond the edge of the camp.

Motion caught his eye and he watched Brovose walk over to ground zero and bend to pick something up. A white glint escaped his hand as he palmed up the tiny object before tucking it into a pouch at his belt. Rain wondered what the object was as Hegar joined him in standing next to the woman. Hegar tapped his foot impatiently as the light did its work.

It took about 30 seconds, but when she finally stopped, Rain felt as if he had just taken a shower. At least on the outside. The memory was still all too real for him to feel truly clean. Looking down, he saw that his clothes, while singed, looked neat and freshly laundered.

The camp was silent, save for the anguished moan of Hegar as he realized that his wolf steak had fallen into the fire in the excitement and was now charred beyond all saving. The wolf corpse itself was gone, bones and all, but somehow the pelt remained. It looked like it had been freshly dry-cleaned, if a bit matted down and tangled.

Well. That happened.

Rain looked at the woman in awe as she calmly walked over to her pack. Shouldering it, she started collecting her various supplies and tucking them away. The others were lazing about.

What bums...the least they could do is help.

Rain got up and moved to do just that. Accepting the crooked spoon he handed her, she nodded to him in thanks. She glanced at where the slime had been, then at the branch, which had been blown into the middle of the road, then back at Rain. Before returning to the cleanup, she smiled and shook her head with a chuckle of amusement.

“Hey,” Rain said, as they worked. She looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

“Thank you.” He knew she didn't understand him, but he felt he needed to say it anyway. He wasn't exactly sure what her role was in this little group, but she was clearly the only responsible member of the party.

She just shook her head. Then, she gestured to herself and said a word.

“Ameliah.” She then pointed to the others and named them in turn.

“Anton,” she indicated the archer, “Brovose,” the mage, and with a roll of her eyes the swordsman, “Hegar.”

She ended by gesturing at Rain, opening her palm in an inviting gesture.

“Rain,” he replied, touching his chest.

“Rain,” she repeated. Nodding, she set back to packing up the camp. Rain hurried to help.

3: Pothole

Once everything was packed away, the group set out on the road. Hegar hadn't retied Rain's hands and had pretty much been ignoring him. That was fine as far as Rain was concerned. He was content to walk in silence as he poked around menus, looking at stats and skills. He had noticed a few more elements of the skill screen. Apparently, he could spend experience to unlock information about the next tier of skills. The descriptions for the first tier weren't particularly detailed and he wasn't expecting it would be any different for information he paid to unlock. He had decided against trying it. Instead, he was paging through the tier zero skills and trying to get a feel for what each tree was about.

There were various trees for physical and magical skills. They ranged from general ones, such as the boringly titled 'melee weapons', to specific ones, such as 'fencing'. In fact, there seemed to be several complementary skill trees available. Investing in both melee weapons and fencing seemed to make a lot of sense, as did other groupings like 'fire magic', 'evocation metamagic', and 'magical utility'. 'Firebolt' could be boosted by the evocation metamagic skill 'guide sending' to add a sort-of aim correction, while 'intrinsic clarity' from magical utility would allow for slightly faster mana regeneration.

There were even trees for things like 'weapon-crafting', 'chemistry', and 'alchemy', which was apparently different from chemistry. The skills in these trees seemed to be of the passive variety, at least at tier zero. +x% damage rating to crafted axes, for example. Rain mentally divided the skill trees into two categories: active and passive. Active skills were actions you could take to affect the world. For physical trees, these were straightforward, mostly fancy names and variations on stab, cut, throw, and shoot. None of these really stuck out to Rain after he had seen Brovose and Ameliah throwing magic around.

He had spent some time trying to figure out what skills they had been using. Brovose had probably been using 'firebolt', which was pretty self-explanatory. There wasn't anything at tier zero matching the magical shield he had raised, though. Ameliah was a bit of a mystery. Her strength made him think that she had some points in the skill 'strength of arm', but he still wasn't clear on whether just adding stat points to strength would have that effect anyway.

The skill she had used after the battle might have been 'purify' from the utility auras tree. The description simply read: "Purify poison, corruption, and contamination within 1 meter." Rain assumed that the range would increase with level as Ameliah's aura had extended much further than that. Either that, or she had invested in 'extend aura' in aura metamagic.

Those two trees were one of only a few pairs that were clearly meant to be used in conjunction. Pairings were usually more general, such as the 'evocation metamagic' tree which would boost 'firebolt', but not 'ice shield'. The aura metamagic tree had Rain's long-dormant munchkin senses tingling. That one tree could boost three others: the offensive, defensive, and utility aura trees. Specializing in auras would allow a great amount of versatility without sacrificing too much power, depending on what was lurking in the higher levels of aura metamagic. The tier zero 'amplify aura' was already promising. It added 10% to the maximum output of any aura. The cost was a 20% increase in mana consumption, but the fact that it said 'maximum output' led Rain to believe that he would be able to vary the strength of an aura at will, up to some limit.

He almost invested his points right then and there, but he resisted the temptation. This wasn't a choice to be made lightly, and there were still tons of trees he hadn't even looked at. There were options for any type of combat you could think of, unless you liked Bards, that was. There wasn't anything even remotely like a charisma tree, though there was 'psionics', which looked like it might turn into something like that eventually. Hard to tell when the only tier one spell was 'mental blast', which appeared to be just a different flavor of firebolt.

Rain was jerked out of the rabbit hole his thoughts had been exploring when his foot detected an absence of the road. He pitched forward, shouting as his foot struck the ground about thirty centimeters lower than he was expecting. His ankle twisted and there was a horrible snapping sound as he fell, shortly followed by a sickening crack as his nose slammed into the earth. He hadn't even tried to protect his face as the still open skills menu was blocking his view.

"Huuurrr," Rain tried to scream through a mouthful of dirt. He suddenly felt himself being hoisted up and set gently down. His ankle immediately rolled and he started to fall again. Whoever had lifted him guided him down, so thankfully he didn't end up with a broken tailbone to go with his nose and ankle. Through the pain, he heard Hegar's grating laughter.

Seriously? Holy fuck this hurts. Not funny. Owwww.

He heard Ameliah say a word and felt her hand on his ankle. Suddenly, the pain was gone. She repeated the word and he saw her hand pass through the floating blue skills screen to touch his nose. He felt it pop back into place as the pain receded. *Healing Word, tier zero, restoration.* Rain thought, still in shock.

His face started to turn red, though it was hard to tell given that it was covered by blood and dirt. Now that the pain was gone, he realized that maybe Hegar had a point. He had done the fantasy equivalent of walking into a light pole because you were glued to your smartphone. Chagrined, Rain dismissed the skills window and looked up at the group of faces staring down at him. Expressions varied from impassivity to tears of laughter.

Rain blushed furiously as Ameliah lifted him up with one hand without any apparent effort, setting him on the ground and then taking a step back.

"T... Thank you," Rain stammered. Ameliah shook her head.

"Rain," she said, gesturing to him. "Ameliah," she indicated herself. Then pointing at the hole, she said another word Rain didn't recognize.

Brovose burst out laughing at this, joining the others in reveling at his expense. Even Ameliah was smirking at him. Rain was still a bit flustered, but the sudden removal of the pain let him appreciate what had happened from the perspective of the others.

Ok, I guess that might have been a little funny.

Glancing at the hole, Rain thought for a moment, then repeated the word she had said before, and pointed at the hole. Ameliah repeated the word, correcting his pronunciation. He tried again and she nodded, then turned and resumed walking.

She heals too. What the heck is her class? Rain idly wondered before Hegar caught his attention. Seeing that Rain was watching, Hegar pointed directly at him and said another word he didn't recognize. The bark of laughter from Anton confirmed that, whatever the word was, it wasn't very nice. It probably described the type of person who would break an ankle because they forgot how to walk.

The others were starting to move down the road again, so Rain dusted himself off and followed, thinking idly about how his right foot was sore and his left wasn't. His left ankle was the one that had been broken. There must have been some spillover from the healing magic as the sole of his foot wasn't sore from walking barefoot anymore.

Ok, next project, shoes. Step one, learn the word for shoes. Step two, ask if there are any in that pack, and if not, step three, steal Hegar's shoes.

Rain hustled to catch up, falling into step behind Ameliah, who he decided was the most likely to answer his questions. "Ameliah," he said, causing her to look at him. He pointed back at the hole saying 'hole' in her language. Then he pointed at a tree and gave her an expectant look. She smiled and said a word, which Rain repeated. He then pointed to the road, then a rock, then her pack, each time, she said the word and he repeated it. Then, to help himself remember, he pointed back at a tree and said the word again. He waited for a nod of confirmation before moving on to the rest of the list, drilling the words into his head.

Once he felt that he had those few words down, he tried for something more abstract. He pointed at himself and said "Rain," then at her, "Ameliah." He then proceeded to point at each of the others in turn, naming them. Lastly, he returned to himself.

"I," he said. Then, pointing at her, he said "You," then Hegar, "You," again, then Anton, "You." He then looked at her expectantly. Catching on, she pointed at herself, saying a word, then each of the others, saying a single, different word.

Got it, 'I' and 'You', that wasn't so bad. Ok, next.

Indicating his shirt, then his pants, he learned the word for both before pointing at her shoes. She gave him the word. With all the pieces he needed, he put his plan into action.

"You shoes," he said pointing at them. "I..." he let the word drag out, pointing at his bare feet. Then, he pointed at her pack "pack shoes?" He raised his voice at the end of the word, trying to sound hopeful. She smiled slightly and shook her head, saying another word.

Damn it. Well, at least I know the word for 'no' now. Rain sighed, then shrugged. *Might as well keep learning words. This road seems to be going nowhere fast, and there is not much else to do. Shit, what was the word for 'road' again? Gah, this sucks. Why couldn't there be a translate skill?*

Rain continued asking for words in this way for a few hours, slowing down considerably as he started forgetting the first ones and having to circle back to them. He picked up some essentials, such as 'here', 'there', and 'we', as well as a few more specific things, like 'slime'. That one had been fun to re-enact. Eventually, Brovose had started getting annoyed at his continual mistakes and taken over from

Ameliah. His tactic was a bit different; he would point at things and demand the word for them from Rain. Oddly enough, Rain found that this method helped him retain the words a bit longer before he forgot them again. At one point, Anton even tried to teach him a word, but Rain recognized it from one of Hegar's earlier bouts of cursing. When Anton said it while pointing at a bird, Rain noticed him struggling to keep a straight face. "No." Rain simply replied and smiled. Brovose smacked the back of Anton's head lightly, saying something complicated that Rain couldn't understand. *Gotta admit, teaching someone that 'shit' means 'bird' would be a pretty good prank. Look at all those shits in the trees. Shits everywhere.*

Eventually, everyone was tired of the game and silence returned. To fill it, Hegar started whistling. Anton threw a rock at him. The hours wore on until the sun started going down and Hegar told Anton to start looking for a place to camp. Or at least, that is what Rain thought he said. He caught the word 'camp' but the rest he was guessing on body language, tone, and the tired mood of the group.

Anton replied and gestured down the road. Rain didn't catch any of it this time, but Hegar just sighed and trudged on, following Anton. An hour or so later, they came to a clearing on the side of the road which contained a ramshackle shack built from unhewn beams. Rain would have called it a log cabin, but really, it wasn't nearly charming enough to justify that.

That thing is nowhere near being up to code. Angus would have a fit if he saw me walk in there. Rain chuckled to himself at the memory of one of his co-workers from a job a year back. The man had hit the deck every time a crane brought a beam within ten meters of him. Rain regarded the shack skeptically. *Well, I suppose it hasn't fallen down yet. Better than sleeping outside.* Rain's feet were dragging at this point and he was almost giddy at the prospect of rest.

Hegar poked his head in the door, looked around, then motioned the rest in. The interior of the shack was a bit cramped, and the floor was dirt, but there were four walls and a roof. *Should stop a slime from eating me while I sleep, or even a musk wolf.* Satisfied, Rain picked a spot in a corner, plopped down, closed his eyes, and went out like a light.

4: Statistics

Rain woke with a start, then groaned softly. He was sore in his everywhere, but in particular, his legs were protesting quite loudly. His body apparently didn't like a full day of walking and then sleeping on a hard dirt floor. Rain winced, sitting up, and looking around. Anton was awake and guarding the door, but the others were still asleep. Anton glanced at him, the soft rays of early sunlight streaming past him into the room. He shook his head and looked back outside, seeming content to continue his watch.

Should I offer to take over? He probably wouldn't trust me enough anyway. Screw it, if he isn't asking, I'm not offering. Ow, my everywhere.

Rain decided to lay back where he was, rather than waking everyone up in an attempt to make his way past their sleeping forms and out into the clearing. He closed his eyes and tried to get back to sleep, but the hard ground was far removed from the comfy bed he was used to. Eventually, he gave it up.

He quietly sat up and started to stretch out a bit, working his protesting muscles until he could sit cross-legged without too much discomfort. Feeling slightly better and with nothing else to do, he decided to have another look through the menus to see if there was anything else in there that he hadn't seen before.

Attributes (+20)
Skills (+2)
Statistics
Options

*I'll look at skills later. I don't think they are going to sleep in long enough for me to finish that... Let's have a look at some other stuff. **Options.***

Rain was met with a simple panel with only a few selectable items.

Options

Interface

Tactile [On/Off] [Gestures]
Mental [On/Off] [Keywords]
Verbal [On/Off] [Keywords]
HUD [On/Off] [Configure]



No difficulty setting, huh? This all just looks like UI stuff. HUD On. Nothing again. Maybe if I touch it?

Rain reached out and tapped the **On** button. Nothing changed other than an **Apply** option appearing at the bottom of the menu. As soon as he pressed that, the menu closed automatically and his eyes focused on his surroundings again. He immediately noticed that there was a small bluish box in the top left of his field of view. It moved with his eyes, staying in the top left corner no matter where he looked.

| | |
|---------|---------|
| Health | 200/200 |
| Stamina | 157/200 |
| Mana | 200/200 |

Oh, cool. That will be handy. He reached out to touch the panel. It tingled slightly but didn't have the resistance of the other menus and his hand passed right through. Also, crap, I'm gonna run out of stamina if we keep going like this. I started at 200 yesterday. Does it come back? It has to, otherwise, what was the point of... shit, what were the damn stats again? Character...damn it, ummm **Attributes**.

| | |
|---------------------------|--------|
| Attributes | |
| Richmond Rain Stroudwater | |
| Level 1 | |
| Experience: 26/100 | |
| Unclassed | |
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |
| | |
| Strength | 10 (+) |
| Recovery | 10 (+) |
| Endurance | 10 (+) |
| Vigor | 10 (+) |
| Focus | 10 (+) |
| Clarity | 10 (+) |
| | |
| Free Points | 20 |

*Vigor, that was it. Can I get more info on these? Oh wait, there was that other panel. **Statistics.***

Instead of replacing the attributes panel, another panel simply popped into place next to it. Rain spent a few minutes looking over the panel, trying to digest the wall of information.

| Statistics | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| | Total | Base | Modifier |
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

| Resistances | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

There didn't seem to be anything he could interact with on the panel at first glance. There also wasn't any explanation of how anything was calculated, though there were a few hints based on the formatting.

Humm, ok, scientific method, here we go. Hypothesis: vigor increases stamina regeneration. Experiment: add a point to vigor. Results: check the status screen.

Slowly, Rain reached out and touched the (+) next to the vigor stat. He was relieved to see that an apply button appeared at the bottom of the menu. He looked for other changes.

Good, can't mess things up accidentally. Let's see here. Stamina regeneration is now showing 110/day. Awesome. Conclusion: Hypothesis is correct. So it is 10 points of regeneration per day per point in vigor.

Pressing the (-) that had appeared next to vigor, Rain proceeded to test the other status, adding and subtracting points. Things worked pretty much like he expected. It was 20 health per point of strength, and the same for the pairs of stamina/endurance and focus/mana. Recovery likewise corresponded to health regen and clarity to mana regen.

Nothing had affected resistances until he added a full 10 points to endurance. When he did, they all ticked up to 2 | 0%. *Huh, so 1 resistance per 10 points of endurance. 1 what? Flat damage reduction,*

maybe? Speaking of units, what the hell does 10 movement mean? Or 10 perception? Nothing seems to affect those anyway. Oh, one more thing. **Statistics.**

Rain dismissed the statistics panel, but the attributes panel stayed open. He reached up and dragged it over to the right, which worked to his satisfaction. He could now see the window showing his current health, stamina, and mana. With resignation, he saw that his stamina currently showed 157/200. The added, but unapplied points to endurance didn't seem to affect his current stats. He couldn't tell if he would end up with 357/400 as opposed to 157/400, should he apply the points. He dragged the window back to where it had been, subtracted out all the points he had added, and then dismissed it.

I really should put points in vigor, but I kinda don't want to. I'm pretty sure I want to be a caster. What good is vigor for a caster? I feel pretty safe with these guys. Boosting myself a little won't make a difference against something like that wolf. They handled it like it was nothing. Level 18, was it? I won't spend any points for now. 150 stamina or so will just have to be enough for today.

Rain had heard the others start to stir, so he slowly got to his feet and stretched, wincing. *I guess health doesn't cover muscle soreness*, he thought, glancing at his full 200/200 health. That window was going to take some getting used too. *Oh, hang on. Options, Customize HUD.*

In the sea of available items, Rain hunted for and found what he was looking for. He was able to change the numerical displays to bars so he could see his stat percentages at a glance. He was also able to lock or unlock the box so he could move it around, including separating it out into multiple boxes.

He moved the green health bar bottom left, yellow stamina went in the bottom middle, and white mana at the bottom right. Then, not liking that, he moved them all up to the top instead. Next, he changed the color and transparency settings, hiding the blue background windows. He left the bars, though he did set them to 50% transparency. Lastly, he changed the color of the bars to red for health, green for stamina, and blue for mana.

Satisfied, he hunted around for other options. This menu, unlike the others, was fairly intuitive and had tons of options for customizing his HUD, including the other menu screens. Not seeing anything else he wanted to change at the moment, he closed it out and looked to the door. His vitals were floating where he could see them, but not getting in the way. Before he could start to make his way past a loudly snoring Hegar, a dialog popped up in the center of his vision.

Training Overview
General Experience Earned
70 – Stamina Use

Rain jumped but managed to bottle up his alarmed shout. *Still not used to that.* Examining the dialog, Rain smiled, then dismissed it with a swipe of his hand. *Good to know that killing things isn't the only way to level up. I guess that was for yesterday?*

Working his way past Hegar, he stepped into the light next to Anton and looked around. The sun was filtering through the treeline, creating pleasant dappled patterns on the grass of the meadow. He could hear the babbling of a brook nearby. Rain walked a little way into the forest, looking for a place to relieve himself with some modicum of privacy. Anton didn't seem to care that he was going off on his own, so Rain felt that it would be reasonably safe. He did his best to ignore his inner voice telling him that the real reason was that Anton didn't care if he got eaten by the wildlife. He wandered towards the noise of the stream, planning on taking a dip after he had finished with his business. *Pretty sure I can't get tree leaves in 2-ply.*

Finding the brook, Rain was happy to see that it was slow moving and deep enough to submerge himself in. Rain walked a little way downstream the brook, grabbed a convenient branch, and dug himself a latrine. Standing back up, he looked around, then shrugged. *Well, either I go now, or later when everyone is up. Modesty is a luxury.*

Rain stripped down, took care of his business, hid the evidence, then jumped in the brook to get clean. The water was absolutely glacial, so he wasted no time washing himself off, using sand as an abrasive in lieu of soap. *Ok, soap, added to the list of things I should ask about. Wait... would purify work on BO? I... kinda don't want to ask. They would think I'm weird, no, weirder..*

Clambering out of the brook, Rain brushed off as much of the water as he could, then decided to use his shirt as a towel. Once he was sufficiently dry, he pulled on his underwear and pajama pants, slung his sodden shirt over his shoulder, and walked back to the clearing.

Anton noticed him returning and said a few words to the others, who were clearly already up and ready to get going. There was no mention of breakfast. Anton led the way onto the road, not waiting for the others, simply continuing in the direction they had been traveling the day before. Ameliah and Brovose followed, moving slightly quicker to catch up. Hegar was grumbling and moving slowly, and Rain caught up to the others from the other side of the clearing in less time than it took Hegar to even get to the road. *Damn, he needs a cup of coffee even more than I do.*

As he reached them, Ameliah greeted him with what he assumed to be a 'good morning', so he replied in kind. Brovose stared at him, an eyebrow raised at his wet hair and naked torso. Rain shifted uncomfortably. He wasn't fat, but he wasn't exactly in great shape either and being shirtless in the middle of a forest wasn't exactly something he was used to.

Brovose held out a hand and said, "Shirt." Hesitantly, Rain handed it to him. As soon as he had it, he said a word and a wave of heat blasted out from his hand where he was holding the cotton garment. Rain watched in fascination as the shirt dried even faster than the level of heat would suggest. Handing the shirt back, Brovose returned to watching the road ahead.

"Thank you," Rain said. That was one of the phrases he had made sure to learn the day before.

Hegar caught up and the group walked in silence for around an hour before Ameliah reached into her pack and distributed some brownish bar-shaped sort of cracker-cake things. She said the name for them as she handed Rain his. It was as hard as a rock and had about as much taste as one, but Rain wasn't about to complain. Free food was free food. He gnawed at his ration as he walked, trying to soften it up, but feeling like it was a fight that his teeth were going to lose. Eventually, he managed to break off a little piece and choke it down. Finishing the bar took him at least 30 minutes, but it was oddly filling

and he was feeling surprisingly good. The swim and the walking were loosening up his muscles, and he seemed to be doing ok without his morning coffee, though a headache might set in later.

To pass the time, he asked for more words, learning things such as ‘river’, ‘clearing’, and ‘forest’. He was starting to get a sense for the language a little bit. Either he was missing something, or the language was considerably simpler than English. The word for ‘forest’ was ‘many tree’ and ‘clearing’ was ‘no tree’. He felt like a bit of a caveman, saying things like ‘me go many tree’ and ‘where rock?’, but apparently that was just how the language worked. Deciding that he was curious enough to attempt it, he tried to ask for clarification.

“Why few word? Why no more word? Why same word thing and many thing?”

This was met with confused looks and a bark of laughter from Anton.

So much for that, I guess I'm missing something then. Damn it, this is annoying. I'll stick to verb-noun. Two word max for the caveman for now.

Hegar called a halt at a smallish clearing when the sun was approaching noon. Rain sighed and plopped down on a log, rubbing at his sore feet. Glancing at his stamina, he noted that it had fallen to around 75. Below half, but he should be able to make it until they stopped for the night. Anton disappeared into the trees, probably hunting, and Hegar actually helped Rain and Ameliah collect firewood without complaining. Brovose had fallen asleep. Everything was ready except that Anton hadn't returned, so Rain walked back over to his log and picked up a longish branch he had found and set aside. He thought it would make a good spear and he wanted a weapon of some kind if he was going to be out here for any length of time.

Moving over to Ameliah, he pointed at the knife she had laid out in preparation for dressing whatever Anton came back with. “Use knife?” he asked.

“Why?”

Not having the words to describe what he wanted, he mimed carving at the branch with a knife. She shrugged, then nodded, but stopped him from taking the knife by the fire. Instead, she handed him a different one from her pack. This one was slightly heavier, more like a dagger than a cooking knife. Before he walked away, she stopped him again with a raised hand.

“My knife,” she said.

Rain nodded, understanding. “Your knife,” he agreed. He then walked back to his log and started trimming off twigs from his hopefully soon-to-be spear. The knife was wickedly sharp and cut through the dense wood with only moderate pressure. He had just started on sharpening the point when Anton returned. He swore and stretched after slamming down the huge, furry form he had been carrying. It looked like a cross between a rabbit and a boar, including size. Anton declined to help skin the animal, leaving it to Hegar and Ameliah to prep the meal. He instead started building a ring of rocks around the slumbering Brovose for some inscrutable reason. Rain shrugged and went back to carving. As sharp as the knife was, the branch must have come from some sort of hardwood tree as it was taking him quite a while to get it down to a point.

By the time the rabbit-boar stew was ready, he felt he had gotten it as sharp as it was going to get. He set down the knife and stood up to test out his handiwork. The makeshift spear was almost as tall as he was, more than slightly crooked, and a bit too heavy. It was better than nothing though. He gave it a few experimental stabs.

It will serve.

Picking up the knife, he walked over to the fire. He thanked Ameliah and trading it to her for a bowl of stew, juggling his spear in the crook of his arm. Sitting down on the ground, he blew on his soup and took a hesitant spoonful. *Hey, not bad. Needs a bit of salt, but it beats the crap out of travel rations. My teeth thank you.*

Brovose suddenly stopped snoring and breathed in deeply. He climbed to his feet and stretched, running a hand through his red hair and blinking bleerily. He started to move over to the fire to grab a bowl but tripped on the ring of stones that the mischievous archer had placed around him. He went down in a tangle of long limbs, causing Anton to spray his mouthful of soup into the fire with a sudden bark of laughter.

The mage looked back curiously to see what had tripped him, then over at Anton. The archer was now choking on his soup due to his unrestrained laughter. Ameliah quickly de-escalated the situation by pulling Brovose back to his feet and handing him a bowl of soup. The mage seemed content with this, though he was scowling at the archer as he ate.

Rain was about halfway through his second bowl when he heard a familiar sounding *splortch* coming from the far side of the clearing. *Shit, another slime?*

Nobody else seemed to have heard the noise, or if they had, they were doing a good job of not caring about it. Rain set his soup aside and stood, grabbing his spear. *Round two, bring it on, slime. I'm armed and I mean business.*

As Rain stood, Hegar glanced at him, then the slime. It looked more or less the same as the first one, perhaps a bit yellower. Hegar looked back at Rain and pointed at the slime, saying something too complicated for Rain to understand. His confusion must have been clear because Hegar facepalmed and spoke again in a condescending tone.

“Rain. Slime. Fire. Far.” He pointed as he said each word, pointing over his shoulder toward the furthest corner of the clearing from the fire.

“Yes, got it, no need to be an ass,” Rain said in English. He walked toward the slime, then suddenly stopped. Hanging over the slime was a small dialog and a red bar. It read simply [Slime], lvl 1. The red bar had no numbers on it and seemed to have modeled its format after his own health bar.

Where was this before? Oh, right, the HUD was off.

Grinning, Rain continued walking towards the slime. *It is level 1, I am level 1. Fair fight, and I have allies if I get in trouble. Ameliah would save me at least. Probably. Come to think of it, I've never seen her fight.*

Rain's thoughts were interrupted as the slime started moving towards him instead of the scent of boar-rabbit soup. He skirted around it, leading it away from the fire.

Ok, the last one jumped at me when it got close, so I'll bait this guy, dodge back, then stab him. Wait, do slimes have genders? Ew. I'll just file that under things I don't need to know. Ever.

When the slime got to around two meters away, it lunged forward as the last one had done. This time, Rain didn't go for the home run and jumped back instead. The slime landed hard on the ground with a disgusting *splutt* noise. Quickly, Rain moved back in and poked at it with his spear. It sunk in without resistance, puncturing the slime's membrane and causing it to leak a bit of disgusting smelling fluid out onto the grass. Rain backpedaled, pulling out his spear and scampering back to the safe two-meter distance.

Looking at the slime's health bar, he noted that it had decreased slightly, but less than he had hoped. *Oh well, rinse and repeat. And then rinse, ugh.*

Rain had to repeat his slime kiting maneuver six more times before he finally finished it off. He hadn't tried to get fancy, and luckily the slime seemed incapable of learning as it kept falling for the same trick over and over. When he depleted its health bar, it simply collapsed and started to lose cohesion. *Nice, no fire, no burning vomit explosion. Much better, but still, yuck.*

You have defeated [Slime], Level 1
25 Experience Earned
[Level Up]

Yeah, that's right, just me, no party. Rain thought, satisfied, as he dismissed the window.

Looking down at his clothes, he saw that he had been splattered with yellow goo despite his efforts to keep out of the splash zone. He sighed and tried to think of a way to ask Ameliah to help him out. Before he could come up with the proper caveman, he was interrupted by a wave of purifying light washing over him.

Turning, he saw that Ameliah had wandered over to him and was now channeling the same purifying aura that she had used before. She wasn't standing with her eyes closed this time, instead, she was walking toward him as the cleansing pulses radiated outwards. The slime started to dry and flake away slowly. It didn't evaporate before it hit the ground as it had before for whatever reason. Nevertheless, the mess was getting cleaned up.

Rain smiled at Ameliah as she approached, thanking her. Then, indicating the glowing pulses, he asked "Purify? Aura?" With some clever pantomime, he managed to learn the word for both, as well as 'firebolt' and 'fire casting', which had been needed to establish context. Already knowing the word for fire and being able to use Brovose as an example made learning the pairing much easier. 'Aura' and 'purify' had been easy enough after that, at least assuming that he had correctly guessed the skill from its effect. For all he knew, he had just learned the name of a skill and a tree that he hadn't gotten to yet in his exploration of the skills menu.

As the slime dissolved, Rain noticed a white glint sitting in the middle of the rapidly shrinking puddle. He waited a moment for the puddle to completely disappear, then walked over and picked up the small shining object. It was crystalline, opaque, and about the size of a grain of rice. It seemed to be giving off a very faint white light even after Ameliah stopped maintaining purify.

“Tel,” Ameliah said, unbidden. Rain pointed to the crystal in his hand for confirmation, and she nodded.

“Tel?” Rain repeated. “My Tel?”

She shrugged and nodded. Then turned to walk back to the camp. Rain followed, peering at the Tel and trying to decide how he was going to keep from losing it. Once they returned to the camp, Ameliah noticed that he was still holding the Tel in his hand and dug out a small glass vial from her pack. It looked like a half-height test tube with a cork. She handed it to him silently. He thanked her again, slipped the Tel inside, and re-corked it, before slipping it into a pocket.

Rain noticed that his remaining stew was gone and that there was a suspicious empty bowl sitting near Brovose. He decided not to make an issue of it, instead retrieving a fresh bowl of stew and retreating to his log. Setting the stew down to cool and leaning his spear against the log, he opened up his attributes screen to check a few things.

| Attributes | |
|---------------------------|--------|
| Richmond Rain Stroudwater | |
| Level 2 | |
| Experience: 21/200 | |
| Unclassed | |
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |
| | |
| Strength | 10 (+) |
| Recovery | 10 (+) |
| Endurance | 10 (+) |
| Vigor | 10 (+) |
| Focus | 10 (+) |
| Clarity | 10 (+) |
| | |
| Free Points | 30 |

Ok, so 10 more stat points from before. So it is either 10 per level and I started with 10 at level zero, or level one is special. **Skills.**

Skills

-

Free Skill Points: 3

-

Utility Auras | Aura Metamagic | Offensive Auras | Defensive Auras | < | > |

And one more skill point. Nice.

Rain stopped himself from opening up the skill trees and getting lost down another rabbit hole. It was tempting. The panel had remembered the last few trees he had been looking at and he was eager to start planning out his build, but he had soup to eat. He could see that the others were already starting to pack up the camp, so he regretfully swiped the panel closed and downed his soup, before walking over and returning his bowl. A single pulse of purify was all it took for Ameliah to clean the bowls and utensils.

Damn, that is so handy. I am totally saving a point for that.

As the day wore on, Rain noticed a change in the landscape. The trees were thinning out, and he started to notice signs of civilization. Slowly, the forest transitioned into tilled fields and fences, with farmhouses visible in the distance. Most seemed to be abandoned, but there was smoke curling out of the chimney of one of the more sturdy looking buildings that they passed. He didn't see any people for another hour or so, but eventually he saw an older man working in a field. The man looked up as they passed, watching them warily until they were out of sight.

Looks like we are headed toward a city, or at least a village.

As they continued, the farms started looking more prosperous and less rough, and the road began to see some traffic. A few mounted men and women rode by on horseback. Rain decided that they must be something like scouts or sentries, as they weren't nearly armored enough to be knights or paladins. It seemed clear to Rain that they were the reason it was possible to have a farm without being found dead in the morning with a slime digesting your head. The equipment of the scouts varied, but he did notice that each of them had a small copper plate hanging from a chain around their neck with some sort of symbol on it. He wasn't close enough to make out what it was, however.

The scouts ignored them, concerned with monsters and not scruffy travelers, Rain decided. They were being similarly ignored by a man driving a donkey-pulled cart down the road towards them. The cart contained a few barrels in the back, and as it drew closer Rain saw that they were probably for ale or beer, as they had taps in the side. Anton perked at the sight, calling out something to the driver in a hopeful tone. The man shook his head and Anton sunk back down dejectedly and went back to complaining about his feet.

Rain kept an eye on his stamina as they continued in this manner. The sun was setting and he was getting down into the low teens when he decided to ask how much further it was to wherever it was

they were going. He was really feeling quite exhausted at this point. His bare feet were aching as he dragged them along, struggling to keep up with the group.

Not having any idea of how to say “are we there yet,” he settled on the caveman equivalent.

“We camp?”

Hegar looked at him, scoffed, and ignored his question. Ameliah gave him an apologetic look, then stopped, seeing how badly he was limping. The others continued, heedless, but Ameliah just motioned for him to stop, then knelt down to look at his feet. They were chafed and sore from the long trek, so much so that he had even lost a few points of health. He had been determined to make it to the camp without complaining like Anton or Hegar, but he was now questioning his stubbornness. Ameliah motioned for him to lift one of them up so she could inspect it. Rain was only mildly surprised to see that he was bleeding from a few small cuts on the sole of his foot.

Ameliah tutted in disapproval and rose to flick his forehead. “Idiot.”

“Sorry,” Rain said, too tired to react to the insult, deserved though it was.

She just shook her head then gestured and reached out with a finger on each hand to touch the tops of both of his feet.

“Healing Word.”

Rain felt the pain suddenly fade and disappear. He lifted up a foot curiously to inspect the sole of his foot and was amazed to see that his skin had been perfectly restored, free of cuts and blisters. He knew what the spell did after the incident with his ankle, but he couldn't get over how amazing it was to be instantly healed.

“Thank you,” he said, then swayed. The healing had done nothing for his fatigue. Ameliah stood and steadied him, then looked toward the others who were barely visible in the growing twilight. They had stopped and were looking back at them.

Ameliah sighed, then said an unfamiliar phrase, shocking him by putting her hand flat against his chest. He staggered back, almost falling, but then noticed that his stamina bar, which had been approaching ten, was now completely full. He realized that he felt much better, the soreness leaving his muscles and his body becoming quicker to respond to his commands. It was a curious sensation, as his mind still felt dead tired, but his body was fresh and well rested.

I guess mental fatigue can't just be magicked away.

“Come,” Ameliah said, motioning toward the others. He followed, and he could hear Hegar complaining at the delay as they approached. Ameliah just ignored him, and Rain decided to do the same. Anton asked her a question, which Rain thought might have contained the word road, and she replied with something Rain couldn't make sense of. Before they set off again, she set down the pack and retrieved a torch, which she lit herself with a flint rather than asking the fire mage.

Yeah, I wouldn't want my head set on fire either.

The group continued for what seemed like several days but in reality was probably only a couple of hours. Rain felt as if he was going to fall asleep walking, his refreshed body perfectly capable of continuing on while he slept. Eventually, his tired eyes noticed light in the distance. He pointed it out to the others. This perked everyone up a bit, Rain being the first to notice that they were approaching their destination.

After another hour or so, Rain was able to recognize that the light was coming from fires on top of a wall of what looked to be a large city. Another hour saw them to the gates of said city, which were open, but guarded by men in full plate armor and long, cruel-looking spears. He tiredly noted that they had the same bronze plates hanging around their necks as the scouts had. This time, he was close enough to see that the symbol carved into them was a shield.

The guards challenged them, stopping them from passing through the gate. Hegar stepped forward and fished out from under his shirt a plate similar to those worn by the guards. It too was bronze, but Rain couldn't see the symbol.

The guards nodded and stepped aside, allowing them into the city. It was fully dark at this point. Their torch was the only source of illumination other than candlelight peeking through gaps in the odd shuttered window. Rain had no idea what time it was, the sun having long-since set. The city seemed to be fully asleep with no one else out, save the occasional plate-armored guard.

He stumbled as his bare feet struggled with the rugged cobblestone paving the streets, righting himself and following the others. They wound their way through a labyrinth of streets bordered by closely built, multi-story buildings. Eventually, they reached a square with a fountain in the middle and headed towards a large stone building with a wooden sign hanging over the door. The sign had the symbol of a sword crossed with a quiver of arrows.

Ameliah extinguished her torch in a barrel of water near the door and dropped it in a pile with other discarded torches. Hegar pushed open the door to the building, causing soft candlelight to flood into the square. He headed inside and Rain followed, seeing a large reception room with seating and several counters along one side. There was an old, reedy man standing behind one of them but the room was otherwise deserted. Hegar headed over to the man and they had a brief discussion. The man shook his head and Hegar grumbled, then took a pouch from his waist, pouring out a handful of Tel and handing them to the man.

Nodding, the man gestured to a hallway, which Rain was delighted to find led to a sort of bunk room. He heard the sound of several snoring forms as the old man, carrying a candle, guided them to five empty bunks near the front of the room.

Finally, something I'm dressed properly for Rain thought, throwing himself onto a bunk and pulling the covers up to his chin.

5: Alone

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

79 – Stamina Use

A groan of discomfort could be heard in the barracks as Rain was woken by blue light shining directly into his brain. The dialog didn't care about the fact that his eyes were closed. He blinked them open and shut a few times, but the dialog didn't dim at all. Angrily, he freed himself from his blanket and swiped at the box, dismissing it. He laid back and sighed, but wasn't able to get back to sleep as the others in the room were moving around and making a racket.

Mandatory 8 AM alarm clock. Yay.

Looking for his companions, he noticed that Brovose was still asleep, or seemed to be. *Now that is some dedication to sleeping in right there. That, or he knows how to... oh. I can probably customize this dialog somehow, can't I?*

There was a thump and Rain noted that Brovose was no longer asleep, having been pushed out of his bunk and on to the floor by Hegar. After a bit of complaining, Brovose got up off the wooden floor and followed Hegar and Anton out of the room. Ameliah was nowhere to be seen. Rain quickly got up and followed to avoid being left in a room with a bunch of unfamiliar dangerous-looking people. *This world has healing magic but... I seriously don't want to know what happened to that guy,* Rain thought, passing a man who looked to have more scars than he did skin.

Following the hallway back to the main room, Rain saw that there were a few more people here this morning. A man and a woman dressed in matching black leathers were staring at a board on the wall covered with posted notices, speaking softly to each other. Two of the counters were staffed, but the old man from last night was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Ameliah was talking to a bored looking woman with salt and pepper hair wearing a modest navy blue dress. The portly man at the other counter was wearing the same shade of blue. From what he could remember, the old man from the night before had been dressed similarly.

Ameliah motioned to the others, then followed the woman in blue into another hallway. Rain followed behind Anton as they made their way into a small room with an oval table surrounded by six chairs. Taking out a notepad and pencil, the woman said a sentence Rain couldn't make out.

In response, the others each fished out a plate like the one Hegar had shown to get them into the city. The plates were about the size of two fingers and had rounded corners. A hole was punched at each end, and the fashion seemed to be to wear them like a necklace. Rain could now see that the plates were inscribed with the same sword and quiver that had been on the sign to this building. Belatedly, he noticed that the same symbol was embroidered on the shoulders of the woman's dress. It was done in black thread and it didn't stand out against the deep navy of the fabric.

The woman was copying something down from the back of the plates onto her pad. As Ameliah handed the woman her plate, Rain noticed that it had a silvery color to it, unlike the bronze of the others' badges.

So this is some sort of guild, and those metal plates are like IDs. Ameliah has a special one, or at least, a different one. Silver is probably better than bronze.

The guildswoman turned to him and gave him an expectant look.

“Sorry, no,” He said, trying to convey that he didn't have a plate. She looked slightly affronted, but then her expression softened as Ameliah spoke to her. She nodded and left the room, saying an unfamiliar word and indicating with a wave that they were to wait there.

“Word?” Rain asked, pointing at the plates sitting on the table where the woman had placed them. Ameliah told him. Then, as they were just waiting anyway, he pointed at more things and learned the words for ‘bronze’, ‘silver’, ‘table’, ‘chair’, and ‘shut up’. The last had been supplied by Hegar.

The guildswoman returned in short order and set two ledgers down on the table along with a leather bag and a scale. The bag looked to be full of something like sand and the scale was the sliding weight type that he had seen in science class back in high-school. Instead of a flat plate, it had a bowl mounted to the end of the arm.

She opened the first ledger and Rain could see that it was filled with lines of incomprehensible text. The woman flipped through it until she found a page about halfway through, then asked Ameliah for something. Ameliah handed her a slip of paper similar to those that had been hanging on the board out in the main room, along with a sealed letter. The woman took the paper, read it, then exchanged a few words with Ameliah before opening up the leather bag and counting out 10 Tel. She passed them across the table to Ameliah, who added them into a smaller leather pouch that hung at her hip. The woman made a note in the ledger, then closed it and opened the other one. Hegar slid two slips of paper across to the woman, who examined them briefly, then, pointing at the first, gave Hegar a waiting look. She said a few words, one of which Rain actually caught. She had said “where...” something.

Anton, who had been digging in the pack, pulled out a bag, which he dumped out on the table to reveal a pile of obsidian arrowheads. The woman quickly checked the paper and counted the arrowheads. Nodding, she made a note in the ledger and looked at the second paper. This one apparently didn't require any proof, as she just asked a question and wrote in the ledger when Hegar replied with an affirmation. She then reached for the bag, but Hegar stopped her with a raised hand, then nodded to Anton. The archer lifted up the musk wolf pelt and placed it on the table, smiling. Examining the pelt, the woman nodded. “Wait,” she said, or at least something to that effect. She used the same word she had before when she went for the ledgers. She left, taking the ledgers and the bag but leaving the scale.

She returned with a third, much thicker ledger. Flipping through it, she found the page she was looking for, wrote down a note, then looked up. Hegar shrugged and she flipped the ledger closed, setting it aside and pulling over the scale. She weighed out a quantity of Tel from the bag, then poured them out onto the table. Brovose started dividing it into three piles. The woman stood and left the room, taking the bag, scale, and ledger with her.

While the others argued about the relative size of the piles, Ameliah walked over to Anton and reached into the giant pack. From it, she pulled a smaller more well-made pack, which she slung over her shoulder.

Noticing this, Hegar glanced up at her and asked a question, to which she replied with a shake of her head.

“Bird,” Hegar cursed, his shoulders slumping. Sighing, he swept up his pile of Tel and laboriously lifted the huge pack. He settled it across his back with considerably more appreciation for the weight than Ameliah had shown. He led the way out of the room, Brovose and Anton quickly collecting their own earnings and following. Rain looked at Ameliah with a questioning look.

She pointed at their retreating forms, saying “They,” then at herself, saying “I not <something> they.”

Ah, so she isn't really with them, they were just traveling together. How did she end up with the pack? Couldn't have convinced me to carry that thing.

Following the others out into the room, Rain saw that the three were arguing over by the board. They didn't spare Ameliah and Rain a glance as Hegar shouted at the others. He grabbed a slip of paper from Anton's hand, pinned it back to the board, pulled down a different one, then walked over to the portly man behind the counter.

Rain stopped watching them and followed Ameliah over to the board. She perused it quickly and selected a slip of paper which Rain saw was marked with a drawing of an open hand. There was also some text which he couldn't read.

She turned to him, frowning slightly.

“Rain,” she said, getting his attention away from inspecting the other papers on the board.

She indicated the paper, saying a word which Rain decided to assign to ‘quest’, given the tone of the world he had seen so far. It seemed to fit. He nodded, to show he understood.

“I <something> quest. You <something> stay <something>.”

Rain paled and shook his head. “I go you?” he asked hopefully.

“No, sorry.”

Rain's shoulders slumped. Shit, she is leaving me here. Fuck. Maybe I can go with Hegar and the others? ... Crap, where did they go? They left? They didn't even say goodbye?!

Rain took a moment to consider, Ameliah watching him silently, clearly uncomfortable. Well, I might be fucked. Though... I guess it is better than being alone in a forest. At least I have a spear now. Shit, I hope nobody stole it, I left it in the bunk room. Ok, Rain, calm down, this isn't so bad. This is some sort of adventurers guild and you can do quests for money.

Rain gestured around at the building. “Word?”

She told him, and he assigned the phrase to 'guild' in his head, even though it seemed to be more than one word. He would parse out which meant adventure and which meant guild later. Unless she had taken him literally and said 'big room' or something. *Shit*. Seeing Ameliah shifting uncomfortably, he quickly tried to explain what he needed.

"I ... food. Sleep. Tel. I no Tel," he said, pulling out the vial containing the single Tel he had gotten from the slime, shaking it to show his meaning. He looked at Ameliah, then at the board. *I'm not begging, I have my pride*. Gesturing to the board, he stated his intention.

"I quest. I guild. You help... I guild?... I... guild...?" Struggling, Rain pointed at himself with one hand, swept another across to indicate the room, then brought his two hands together.

Ameliah seemed to struggle with this for a few moments, then, laughing, she smiled and clapped him on the shoulder.

Good, she gets it. Yes, I want to join the guild. He thought as she turned back to the board. Looking over the items, she selected one from the very bottom and pulled it down to show it to him. It had a picture of what Rain recognized as a slime scrawled in the middle. There was also a sword drawn up near the text at the top of the posting.

"Quest," Ameliah said, pointing to the title text of the posting. "Slime," she named the monster, then pointed at the sword and mimed stabbing with a spear. "Kill," she said, Rain assigning the word as she said it.

To the left of the slime was drawn a large character. She pointed to it, then held up her hand, raising one finger at a time until she had all five fingers raised. "Five."

Down at the bottom of the image was a tiny drawing of a Tel, next to the same character.

"Five Tel," she said, then gesturing with the slip to the counter, she said "You five slime kill, you guild five Tel <something>." The word order was a bit strange, but Rain thought he caught the important bits.

Eagerly, Rain smiled and nodded. "Yes."

Taking the slip from Ameliah, Rain walked over to the counter. She followed him. There was nobody in line, so he walked straight up to the portly man and placed the quest on the counter, saying "I quest." The man replied with a fast sentence that Rain had no hope of understanding. Ameliah held up a hand, then had a quick back and forth with the man, who looked a bit shocked, staring at Rain before continuing his questioning of Ameliah. Eventually, they seemed to reach an understanding. Ameliah dug out her pouch and placed a handful of Tel on the counter while the man retrieved a ledger from a shelf behind the desk area.

The portly man placed a ledger on the counter, as well as a bronze plate inscribed with the guild's symbol. Flipping it over, he copied the number down into the ledger, then looked expectantly at Rain and asked a question. Before Ameliah could reply, he guessed what the man wanted and stated his name, "Rain."

He watched as the man scratched his name into the ledger next to the number from the plate. The characters made no sense to him, but Rain tried to remember them anyway. *Speaking first, writing later, still, I should be able to spell my own name. Damn it, why is there no translation spell?*

The man handed Rain the plate and Ameliah fished out a length of cord from her bag so he could hang it around his neck. The man then picked up the quest paper and, glancing at it, selected another ledger from the shelf. He flipped through it, checking some numbers on the back of the quest paper against a list. At least, Rain was assuming they were all numbers. One of them was a five, that he knew.

Finding what he was looking for, he read out the text near the string of numbers to Rain. It went straight over his head, of course. Ameliah was frowning slightly. She turned to Rain and tried to explain what the man had said, but whatever it was, he wasn't able to make heads or tails of her gestures. *Under... something? Are the slimes in a cave? No, wait, what the heck does that gesture mean? Ugh.*

Sighing, Ameliah turned and spoke to the man. The two argued for a bit before she reluctantly opened her pouch and passed the man another handful of Tel. *Shit, how much was that? Way more than 5, that's for sure.* The man smiled and accepted his bribe, clapping Rain on the shoulder.

Ameliah made to give Rain a handful of Tel as well, but he stopped her with a raised hand.

"No." I owe you too much already. I'll be ok.

She tried to push it into his hands, but he refused to take it, shaking his head. The man laughed, but Ameliah shot him a look, then, acquiescing, returned the Tel to her pouch. Turning to the man, she presented her own quest paper and plate, causing the man to duck into a back room and return with a stack of ledgers bound by string. Ameliah took them from him, depositing them into her bag as he wrote her plate number down in yet another ledger.

Ameliah pulled Rain away from the counter, making sure that he had his plate as well as the quest paper. Releasing him and stepping back, she nodded, then frowned again. She pointed at the portly man, who was standing behind the counter watching. "Gus," she named him.

Rain nodded. "Thank you, Ameliah."

"Rain." She smiled. Then, without another word, she turned and headed towards the door. Halfway there, she hesitated for a moment, as if she was going to turn back. Instead, she shook her head and continued. Just like that, she was gone and Rain was alone.

6: Skill

It was the sight of Ameliah leaving that really hammered it all home for Rain. He was alone, isolated by language, culture, and time. Adrift in a sea of unfamiliar faces, unable to speak the language, struggling with his grasp on reality, Rain decided he needed a minute. He walked over to one of the rows of benches along the side of the room, sat down, and rested his head in his hands.

This really was quite a situation he had found himself in. In the left pocket of his pajama pants, he had half of a trail ration, his jaw not having been up to finishing his supper from the day before. In his right pocket, he had the little vial with a single crystal shard inside, no bigger than a grain of rice. Wrapped around the vial was the quest notice, the layer of paper adding some meager protection to the glass vial.

His plain white t-shirt was crumpled and he was barefoot. His messy brown hair was badly in need of a wash, preferably with some shampoo, and only the fact that many of the adventurers crowding the room smelled as bad or worse than he did kept him from dying of shame.

His unusual attire was getting him some stares from the other occupants of the room. Too overwhelmed to care, Rain stared right back, noting swords, shields, bows, axes, spears, staffs, and so forth. No guns, no plastic, nothing even remotely electronic. Just men and women, mostly dressed in shades of brown and green, mostly armed, and mostly dangerous looking. He watched them come and go, his stomach rumbling at his lack of breakfast, and his mouth dry. Sighing, he got up to look for the bathroom and something to drink.

Gus looked up from behind his counter as Rain rose from his seat, but made no move to stop him when he headed for one of the hallways leading off of the main room. Rain hadn't seen anything like a bathroom down the hallway to the bunk room, so he picked the other wing of the building and headed down the hallway. The hallway was dim in the morning light, only illuminated by the windows letting sunlight into the main room.

He found the bathroom, or just toilet he supposed, it not having anything remotely resembling a bath. It left much to be desired. He saw no way for him to wash his hands or even a mirror for him to tame his hair. He tried not to think about all the diseases he was probably acquiring as he walked to the toilet with his bare feet.

His business taken care of, he searched the small room. He noted that they did have something approaching toilet paper, but he didn't need that right now as it hadn't been that kind of business. The toilet had no flush obviously, and he felt no desire to look down the dark shaft. Thankfully, there was a heavy scent of pine in the air from some sort of greenery pinned to a wall, and, while primitive, the facility was clean enough. He still felt like he needed a shower though.

Exiting the bathroom, he suppressed a full body shudder at the thought of his unwashed hands, or, more accurately, the thought of everyone else's unwashed hands. Instead of heading back to the main room, he continued down the hall, following the sound of several people talking. Ignoring closed doors along the hallway, he came out into another large room which seemed to be some sort of restaurant or bar. There were tables strewn about, a bar, with no-one behind it at the moment, and a few people lounging around and talking. Nobody looked up as he came in.

Rain saw a man filling a mug with a ladle of water from a barrel near the bar. Trying not to think about where the man's hands had been, Rain grabbed a mug from the bar, filled it, and drank it down. He re-filled the mug, then made his way over to a table to sit and think.

Well, here I am. Time to think about priorities. Humm. Priority one, don't die. To that end, I need food. I have 1 Tel, but I don't know how much that is worth. I also have half of a nutritional brick, but I'd better save that for later if I am starving or I need to break a window. So then, priority two is food so I don't die and priority three is money so I can buy more food. I guess I could go out and search the city for food, but that isn't solving the larger problem. I'm a little hungry right now, but I have skipped breakfast before, so it can wait.

Fishing out the paper from his pocket, Rain looked at the picture of the slime and the little sword. *They must make these this way so people can pick up quests quickly by scanning for the symbols. That, and probably some of these people can't read. Given the tech level, I wouldn't expect schools to be a thing. Having the clerk explain the quest is a simple solution, at least for stuff like this. Anyway, I think that I can do this, killing five slimes doesn't sound so bad, as long as they come one at a time. Five Tel as a reward seems pretty good I guess, and that is in addition to the 5 that will drop from the slimes. I'd feel a lot better with 11 Tel than 1.*

Retrieving the vial from his pocket, Rain shook it, looking at the little white crystal. *So monsters drop these, or at least slimes do at any rate, and these adventurers use them as currency. Seems pretty inconvenient, but then again, I'm not sure what they are worth. It could be that 1 Tel buys me food for a month, though judging by how many were in the sack that woman had, somehow I doubt that.*

Sitting up and slapping his face, Rain grabbed the vial and re-wrapped it in the paper before shoving it in his pocket. *Well, I'm not going to get them just sitting here. I've spent plenty of time sulking about what I don't have, let's see what I do. Attributes. Statistics.*

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 2

Experience: 100/200

Unclassed

| | |
|---------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Strength | 10 (+) |
| Recovery | 10 (+) |
| Endurance | 10 (+) |
| Vigor | 10 (+) |
| Focus | 10 (+) |
| Clarity | 10 (+) |

| | |
|-------------|----|
| Free Points | 30 |
|-------------|----|

| Statistics | | | |
|------------|---------|---------|----------|
| | Total | Base | Modifier |
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

| Resistances | | | |
|-------------|--------|--------|----------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

30 free points, strength for strength, endurance for defense, focus for magic. Recovery stats for all three. Right now, I'm sitting at more or less full on health, stamina, and mana. Is 200 a lot? I think not. Should I put points in strength to get more health? How about recovery? Right now I am back to full in everything in two days. Ten points would mean I could recover to full every day. That seems better somehow, at least right now, but... No, let's look at skills first. **Skills.**

| |
|--|
| Skills |
| - |
| Free Skill Points: 3 |
| - |
| Utility Auras Aura Metamagic Offensive Auras Defensive Auras < > |

Three points, and hundreds of skills to pick from. Or even hundreds of skill trees. It wasn't like I reached the end of that list. Priority, heck, what was I up to? Well, if 4 is picking skills and 5 is stats, priority 6: customize these dang menus to be a bit easier to use. Anyway, I don't have time to dig through all of these and pick out the exact skills I want. I already found something that looks good with the auras, so let's have a look at those.

Offensive Auras

Tier 0

Immolate (0/10) (+)

7-8 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Refrigerate (0/10) (+)

7-8 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Tier 1

Locked (Unlock - 100)

Those both seem pretty brutal. Range is a bit of a problem though.

Defensive Auras

Tier 0

Heat Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase heat resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Cold Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase cold resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Tier 1

Locked (Unlock - 100)

3% doesn't seem like much, but if I got it to level 10, I assume that would be 30%. These... kinda suck, at least right now. Maybe if I found some way to boost them?

Utility Auras

Tier 0

Purify (0/10) (+)

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 10 mp/min

Spring (0/10) (+)

Multiply S.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Summer (0/10) (+)

Multiply H.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Winter (0/10) (+)

Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Tier 1

Locked (Unlock - 100)

There is purify. I want it so bad. Instant shower, laundry, and cleaning service all in one. Utility is damn right. The others don't look bad either. Humm, mana regen, but it costs mana. So if I get 100 mana a day right now, boosting that is 10 mana per day, which is less than, hang on, are days even 24 hours here? Wait, why is the range of everything in meters?

...

Just roll with it, I have a big enough headache already. Anyway, uses more mana than it restores for me, but for others it would be good. If I put a bunch of points in it maybe I'd break even eventually. These all could be good, but, I should probably take one of the offensive ones first. I'll be back for you purify.

Aura Metamagic

Tier 0

Amplify Aura (0/10) (+)

Multiply aura intensity by 110%

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Extend Aura (0/10) (+)
Extend aura range by 1 meter
Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Tier 1

Locked (Unlock - 100)

Amplify is nice. So is extend. That could help with the range problem for immolate or refrigerate. Ok, time to make a decision. Is this what I want to focus on?

Rain sat and thought, paging through different trees to check a couple numbers. He noted a few other nice skills available at tier 0, most having higher damage than that listed on the auras on a per-mana or per-stamina basis, but something about the aura trees was speaking to him. What settled it was thinking about what he wanted to do after he was over this initial hurdle. In his past life, some of his best memories were going on adventures with his friends, both in real life and in games. If there was one sure way to make friends in a fantasy world, it was to play a class that was good for the party. Auras had that in spades.

I'm not just going to be some buff beacon though. This support will have some teeth!

Flicking to the offensive aura page, Rain debated briefly, then touched the **Refrigerate** skill. If he was going to be fighting slimes, he didn't want them detonating when they got near him. One meter was way too close for that to be a valid strategy. The skill ticked to 1/10 and the apply button appeared. He pressed it before he could change his mind. Closing out the menu, he stood, wanting to try out the skill before devoting more points to it.

Rain headed back towards the main room, intending to go outside to test his aura so he didn't bother anyone by giving them frostbite. He noticed that one of the doors on the way to the main guild hall was open that hadn't been before. Peering in as he passed, he noticed that the scarred man he had seen in the bunk room was swinging an axe at a wooden dummy. It seemed to be some sort of practice room. Rain smiled. *Even better.*

Entering the room, Rain walked over to a dummy near a window, as far from the man as possible so as to not disturb him. Getting within a meter of the dummy, Rain felt a bit silly, practically hugging it as he was. He set the feeling aside to try out his new skill.

*Let's see here. **Refrigerate.***

Instead of a burst of cold, Rain noticed a small window appear in the bottom right of his vision. It was a square with the image of a snowflake. *Ah, so that just selects the skill. How do I use it?*

Rain concentrated on the image of the snowflake. He felt something at the edge of his awareness, like he was pushing at a barrier with his mind. Re-focusing his effort, Rain gasped as he broke through whatever membrane had been separating him from the skill. He felt cold rush through his veins and a burst of bluish white light shone from his skin as a circle of frost started to form on the ground below him. The dummy was quickly coated in a thin layer of icy crystals and Rain gasped at the feeling of

mana flowing through him for the very first time. The frost stopped at a very short distance from him, and he stopped concentrating on the skill, seeing that his mana was quickly dropping.

Rain stepped back from the dummy and inspected it. The frost was already starting to melt, leaving a film of dew over the surface of the dummy and on the floor where he had been standing. Checking his mana, he saw that he was down about 10%.

Damn, that uses mana fast. I don't know how good this will be against a slime. Can I pulse it real fast so it only deals one tick? Is 8 damage a lot? I really don't want to hug a slime while I wait for it to turn into an ice cube.

Not bothering to step back up to the dummy, Rain concentrated on the snowflake again and tried to release a single pulse, pulling back as soon as he managed to break through the barrier. A wave of cold blasted out from him and he was happy to see that the decrease in his mana bar was hardly noticeable.

Nice. Now, the range. If I put another point in it, does the range increase, or do I need to put a point in extend aura?

Rain re-opened his skills menu, noting that the Refrigerate skill was now listed in the main panel, not just under the tabs. When he tried to put another point into it, however, he found that he couldn't. The skill showed (1/10), but there didn't seem to be a way to increase it. Looking at the skills screen, he noticed that in addition to the (1/10), the main panel now had a line saying 0/100 experience next to the skill.

Oh.

Ooooooh.

Skill points are just for unlocking! That changes things. How do I get experience? Practice? Using it in combat?

Rain caught himself musing and forcibly stopped himself. He would find out once it came up. For now, he needed to do something about that range. He flicked to the aura metamagic tab and added a point to extend aura and applied it. He decided to save the last point for later. His thought was to put it in purify, but he didn't want to do that now in case he needed it for a more combat ready skill.

As an afterthought, he pulled up the attributes menu, hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and dumped 10 points into clarity, bringing his regeneration up to 200/day.

This way, I can go out every day and use all my mana. I think I'm getting an idea for a build here. I need to check the math, but maybe...

Rain was smiling happily as he looked over his status, trying to keep his expectations realistic and failing, his mind wandering off into his own private fantasy of his future badassery.

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 2

Experience: 100/200

Unclassed

| | |
|---------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Strength | 10 (+) |
| Recovery | 10 (+) |
| Endurance | 10 (+) |
| Vigor | 10 (+) |
| Focus | 10 (+) |
| Clarity | 20 (+) |

| | |
|-------------|----|
| Free Points | 20 |
|-------------|----|

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|---------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 200/day | 200/day | 0 0% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Skills

Refrigerate (1/10) Exp: 0/100

7-8 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Extend Aura (1/10) Exp: 0/100

Extend aura range by 1 meter

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Free Skill Points: 1

7: Slime

Rain spent a few more minutes practicing against the dummies, trying to get a feel for how extend aura interacted with refrigerate. He was glad to learn that he could choose not to extend the range, should he wish to conserve mana. He experimented by temporarily putting a few points in focus, keeping his skills menu open to watch as the damage on his refrigerate aura increased. It seemed like the scaling on the damage was really bad, so he backed the points out and closed the window. *I'll put them in something if I need it. I know I can kill a slime with a spear, so if I get in trouble I can run away and dump them into strength. Slimes are slow and not that bright.*

Moving back out to the main guild hall, Rain noticed that there were considerably more people milling about, some waiting in lines at the counters, others examining the board, and some just standing around and talking. Surveying the room, he saw many bronze plates and the odd silver one here or there, as well as many people with no plate showing. Some of these were clearly guild members, just not displaying their plates, but others seemed to be just regular people. He was a little disappointed that there weren't any elves or dwarves mixed in with the group.

Quickly, Rain walked back to the bunkroom and retrieved his spear from under the bunk he had been using. Thankfully it was still there. He was less worried that someone would have stolen it and more worried that someone would have thrown it out. It was hardly an impressive weapon.

Walking back into the guild foyer, Rain saw that Gus didn't have anyone at his counter at the moment, so he walked over to him and nodded.

“Slime?” he asked.

Gus nodded, walking out from behind his desk and motioning for Rain to follow, giving his spear a dubious look. One of the other clerks shouted at Gus as he left the desk, but Gus just waved him off and led Rain out and into the square. He walked for a short way, trying to keep up a brisk pace while looking around the city, now in daylight. The buildings were predominantly wooden with tile roofs, though there was the odd stone building, such as the guild hall.

Luckily, Gus didn't take many turns as he led him through the city, alleviating Rain's worries about getting lost. He did know the word for the adventurers guild and could probably ask for directions from someone on the street, but he was glad to not have to worry about it. There weren't that many people out, but there was some traffic. Gus had stopped at the entrance to an alley which seemed to end in a flight of stairs, heading down. As Rain looked at the stairs, he saw a man coming up, carrying an empty, stained bucket.

The man passed them as they stood in the entrance of the alley, and Rain caught a whiff of whatever had been in the bucket as the man passed.

Auggggh, damn it. Idiot, where did you think slimes would be living? Of course it is a fucking sewer. That guy was emptying a chamber pot. What have I signed myself up for?

Gus pointed at the stairs, then, giving Rain's bare feet and makeshift spear another look, sighed, shook his head with an expression that clearly said ‘not my problem’. He turned to walk back to the guild.

“Wait!” Rain cried out, causing Gus to turn and look at him impatiently. “Slime... dangerous?”

Gus laughed and shook his head. “No, slime not dangerous. Slime <something>” he said, putting on an exaggerated face of disgust. He gave Rain’s bare feet another look, laughed, and turned away.

Rain almost put a point in purify right then and there, but he stopped himself in case he needed it for an offensive spell like firebolt. *This is going to suuuuuuuck. Maybe it will be a nice sewer... yeah, who am I kidding. Still, do I really want to go down there alone? Looks pretty dark. I’m not too worried about slimes, Gus just said they aren’t dangerous and I know that they are really slow, so even if there are a bunch of them I could get away. What I am really worried about is something like that wolf...*

Rain shook his head to clear his nerves. *No, there wouldn’t be one of those down there.* Rain told himself, watching as another man passed him to descend the stairs, carrying another bucket. *That guy doesn’t have a weapon. I’m sure I’ll be fine. Damn it, famous last words, why did I even think that?*

Rain’s stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn’t had breakfast. Fishing out his ration bar, he bit off a chunk with some effort and tucked the rest back into his pocket. *I don’t really have the luxury of waiting. It is this, or starve. I don’t think medieval societies were big on social welfare. I wonder if I could get someone to come with me?*

Rain recognized that he was stalling, and forced himself to move. Cautiously, he walked to the top of the stairs and looked down. Thankfully, there were torches burning on the walls for light and the smell wasn’t too bad...yet.

Slowly, he made his way down the stairs, trying not to pay attention to the feeling of cold stone on the bottoms of his very bare feet. The smell was growing stronger, but it still wasn’t worse than the familiar scent of a construction site porta-potty. By the time he reached the bottom, the light from the street was no longer reaching the floor of the stone tunnel. He waited as his eyes adjusted to the torchlight and his nose adjusted to the smell before continuing out into what appeared to be a waterway.

It wasn’t nearly as bad as he expected. The water looked a little bit discolored, but it wasn’t the literal river of shit he had been expecting. There was moss and fungus growing from the floor near the water, and there was a noticeable brown stain on the edge near the bottom of the stairs. Some careless individual must have dumped their disgusting burden a bit too close to the edge.

The floor of the tunnel was stone, but proximity to the water and the moss made it feel a bit slick and slimy on the soles of Rain’s feet.

Exploring sewer barefoot, 2/10. Would not recommend. Fuck me, what am I doing down here?

Not seeing any slimes or hearing the distinctive splortch, Rain looked up and down the waterway. He could see torches off in the darkness every so often, casting soft pools of light and revealing one or two additional tunnels branching off in the distance.

Slimes are probably at the nastiest part. Shit flows downstream and all that. Fuck me.

Turning, Rain started walking slowly, watching his step until the torchlight faded so much that he could only make out general shapes. He slowed down even further until his eyes adapted fully. He found that he could see well enough to avoid stepping into anything... unfortunate, so he decided to continue.

As he traveled down the dark waterway, Rain reflected on his life choices up to this point. He had clearly messed up somewhere along the line and this was his punishment. He shuddered as his foot touched something that went squish.

“Just moss, it was just moss,” Rain told himself, trying to believe it, but failing pathetically. Soon, he came to an intersection with a torch and a tunnel leading off to the side. The tunnel sloped slightly upward but was otherwise nondescript. The tunnel was dry, with no channel for water in the middle. Rain was about to pass it by when he heard an echoing noise coming from the tunnel.

Yup. I recognize that sound. Going towards the sound. Fuck me.

Rain crept up the hallway, the torchlight fading. Before it dropped off completely, he saw the distinctive blobby form of a slime oozing towards him. He backed up slowly, leading it into the light and being careful to maintain at least two meters of distance. As he got a better look at the thing, he noted that this one was colored green and brown, different from those in the forest. Thankfully, it still had the same [Slime] Level 1 floating over it, so it wasn't some sort of horrible murder-king death-slime or anything.

Looking behind himself, Rain eyed the distance to the water. He had plenty of space to work with. He thought he should be able to kill the slime before he ran out of tunnel. That was good, as he didn't want to try edging around it. Stopping, he waited for the slime to approach. At two-meters, it leapt as expected. Rain dodged back and stabbed forward, trusting to his spear to keep the slime at bay. He saw the slime's health bar decrease by around ten percent, giving him a baseline.

Ok, let's see how well this works.

Rain waited for the slime to leap again. He dodged, and this time instead of stabbing with his spear he stabbed at the barrier in his mind, releasing a freezing pulse of his refrigeration aura. As he had practiced in the guild, he pushed more mana into the skill to extend the range. The wave of cold brushed against the slime, which quickly started crystallizing. Rain pulled the mana back, being very careful with his limited supply. He saw with satisfaction that the slime's health had dropped by about a third while his mana had only dropped by a small sliver.

“Yeah, take that you nasty-ass ball of shit!” Rain shouted, backpedaling as the slime oozed towards him. It seemed to be moving a bit slowly, so Rain, feeling bold, stepped in without waiting for it to leap, stabbing at it with his spear. The slime bunched up as if to jump, but the spear hit first, puncturing it and causing it to twitch away. Pressing the attack, Rain swept his spear left and right, drawing deep furrows in the slime's membrane. The slime died without a chance to counter-attack, the cold apparently having severely reduced its speed.

You have defeated [Slime], Level 1
25 Experience Earned

The slime slowly spread out across the floor of the tunnel, flowing down the slope towards him. Rain walked up to the edge of the growing puddle of filth and poked around with his spear, looking for the Tel. He cursed. There was nothing there, either it hadn't had one, or he wasn't able to see it in the dark.

*I'm not giving up that easy. **Skills.***

Pulling up the skills menu, Rain flipped to the utility page and added a point to purify.

*I am NOT walking through that, and I need that damn crystal. **Purify!***

The icon in his vision changed from a snowflake to a diffuse white light. Focusing on it, Rain activated the skill. Pulses of white light gathered on his skin, much fainter than the light that Ameliah had used. Slowly but surely the light spread out in the tunnel. As it came into contact with the slime, it started to dry and evaporate, but it was slow, and the radius was uncomfortably close to Rain's feet. Gritting his teeth, he walked forward, right into the puddle, shuddering at the squelching feeling of the slime smooshing between his toes.

It will all go away, the skill will clean it all away. I will be clean, this is only temporary. Oh fuck, why does it have pulp?

It felt like it took around five minutes for the puddle to completely evaporate. Rain checked his skill panel to confirm the mana cost of the skill before committing to drying out the whole thing. He didn't want to run out of mana down here, but the modest cost of 10MP/min wasn't that bad. He even used extend to widen the radius so it included more of the puddle at once.

By the time he was done, Rain was standing in the center of an incongruously clean section of the tunnel. Getting down on his hands and knees didn't bother him, as the stone was free from slime, dust, and dirt. It looked as if it had been freshly scrubbed. He moved around the circle, then swore, not seeing any sign of a crystal. He was sure that he would have seen it if it was there; the torchlight was bright enough for that.

Dejectedly, he got to his feet and started moving deeper along the tunnel, wincing at the feeling of the slimy stone as he stepped out of the purified circle. *There are more torches down here, so someone must use this tunnel for something.*

He continued down the tunnel for another ten minutes or so before he heard the same characteristic noise indicating that a slime was near. He edged closer, his eyes searching the darkness. As the sounds grew louder, he managed to make out not one, but three forms inching their way towards him.

*I don't know whether to laugh or to cry. **Refrigerate.***

Rain switched back to his offensive spell, berating himself for not doing so earlier, then edged towards the slimes. He tried to get them bunched up against one wall but had little success. Gritting his teeth, he stopped, waiting for the lead slime to make its leap. It did, and he dodged back, activating his aura and leaping back in, striking with his spear. He left the aura on as waves of cold rolled over the lead slime, extending it to maximum range and dodging back as the other two slimes leapt. The first slime was shaking and large chunks were starting to form near its surface. Darting back in, Rain maintained his channel and stabbed at one of the other slimes, letting his aura do its work.

The slimes were significantly slowed. He was able to dart in and out quickly enough to keep all three of them at bay until the first slime died, melting into disgusting chunky slush. Moving forward so the others would be fully in his aura, he stabbed at them until the last health bar winked out. It was only a few seconds but to Rain it felt like hours.

Panting, Rain deactivated his aura and stepped back away from the three growing puddles of greenish brown fluid. His knuckles were white from how tightly he had been gripping his spear.

You have defeated [Slime x3], Level 1
75 Experience Earned
[Level Up]

Glancing at his mana bar, he saw that his prolonged use of the aura had dropped it down to a little over a third remaining. He felt a headache starting to build behind his eyes from the mental exertion combined with the smell of the thawing slime slushie coating the floor of the tunnel. He noticed that his stamina had also dropped to around half from all the walking combined with frantic combat.

Another level up, nice. First things first though.

Determinedly, Rain waded into the mess, switching to purify and trying to catch his breath as the slime started to evaporate. The aura seemed to work much faster on the smell, the fumes from the slime not being able to reach all the way to his nose before being purified into nothingness. Rain idly wondered about conservation of mass as he waited for the spell to do its work.

He got to his hands and knees once the area was reasonably slime free and hunted around for crystals. Rain slumped back after searching for a few minutes, losing hope that these sewer slimes would drop any Tel. Either the forest slimes differed in more than just color, or he had gotten lucky before. Getting to his feet, Rain dusted off a bit of slime from his knees and canceled his aura.

*No point getting 100 percent clean until I've taken care of the last one. **Refrigerate.***

Remembering to switch back to his offensive aura this time, Rain resumed his slow plod down the tunnel. It had started to slope downward again, and Rain was being cautious as the stones were slightly slick after the passage of the slimes. *Just one more. If I see a group, I'll run.*

He came to an intersection after a little while and cautiously inched out into it, looking both ways. He couldn't see anything in either direction, no torches being lit in either branch. Rain stood, listening and searching the darkness, but seeing and hearing nothing save for the drip of water in the distance.

I guess this is it. I'm not going any further without a torch. I suppose I'll go back and grab one off the wall. I don't suppose anyone will miss it. Someone has to be bringing fresh ones down here, otherwise I wouldn't be able to see at all. I didn't think torches lasted this long.

Rain's musing was interrupted by a disgusting sucking noise, as if a gigantic suction cup had been pulled from a mildewed tile wall. He wasn't able to react or even determine the direction of the sound

before a heavy, wet, *something* dropped down from the darkness overhead, landing directly on his head.

Rain twitched in fright and tried to scream, the only result of which was the exquisite taste of chunky, warm, unspeakable vileness forcing its way into his mouth. The slime pulled itself laboriously over Rain's body, attempting to engulf him completely, but not quite having the mass to manage it. Rain thrashed about with his spear, choking on slime as his skin started to burn from whatever juices the slime was secreting in its efforts to digest him.

Panicking, Rain fell to the floor and thrashed wildly, his spear forgotten. His hands clawed at the slime as he tried frantically to clear his airway. In some small corner of his panicked mind, Rain suddenly recalled that he had a way out of this situation. Concentrating, he activated his refrigeration aura at full strength, not even realizing that he was wasting mana by extending the range needlessly.

He felt the temperature of the slime on his skin rapidly drop, rough chunks of ice forming and growing larger. He didn't relent, clawing at the slime blocking his mouth. The slime died from the cold and started to lose cohesion, falling away as a slushy, chunky mass. Rain vomited out the contents of his stomach, then curled into a shivering ball. His aura flickered and died, his mana fully depleted.

You have defeated [Slime], Level 1
25 Experience Earned

8: Clarity

Rain slowly unclenched from a ball, coughing and spitting, trying to clear the horrible taste in his mouth. His head was pounding from lack of air and mana depletion and he was covered from head to toe in a layer of cold, icy, yuck.

Purify.

Rain concentrated, but nothing happened other than the throbbing behind his eyes growing slightly worse. He was completely out of mana, his refrigeration aura having saved him from death by suffocation, but taken his entire mana pool in exchange.

Fuck this. I'm doing it now, even if I haven't done the math. Attributes. Statistics.

Focusing on the attributes screen, Rain dumped 30 points into clarity, implementing the idea he had been toying with back at the guild. Auras consumed mana per second, and Rain wanted to be able to use them indefinitely, so he had hatched the idea of pumping up clarity as high as it would go. He still wasn't sure if that was a good idea in the long run, but right now, covered in unspeakable corruption, out of mana, and shivering in a dank sewer, he thought it sounded like a great fucking idea.

He verified on the statistics panel that his mana regeneration would increase to 500/day, then smashed the apply button.

Dismissing the menu, Rain shivered and waited as his mana returned with excruciating slowness. He tried to ignore his sense of touch as he lay in the freezing puddle, eventually standing and trying to claw off as much of the freezing slime as he could.

Five hundred per day is... divide by 24... something like 20 an hour? Divide by 60... one mana every three minutes? Ish? Fuuuuuck it is so slow. I might have just made a huge mistake.

Rain wanted to open up the options menu and see if there was a way to modify his statistics screen to change the units, but he resisted. Instead, he crouched down and tried to stay quiet, listening hard for any sound of another slime approaching.

The quest said to kill five, not that there WERE five. Ok, come on, I should have enough by now.

Rain's teeth were chattering and his health had dropped by about a quarter from the slime's acid, combined with the cold. His mana bar was still showing almost empty but he decided to try it anyway, focusing on the image of light and summoning his purification aura.

Yes! It's working.

The slime clinging to him started to dry, but Rain ran out of mana again and the purifying waves stopped. The pounding behind his eyes redoubled as he was forced to cancel the skill. The slime seemed to be a bit less sticky and he had more success in wiping some of it away. He removed his shirt, noting that the acid hadn't done it any favors, and wrung it out, globlets of slime dripping off it and to the ground. He wiped at his face with the shirt. It helped a little bit. His shirt ripped as he tried to pull it

back on, the acid having weakened the fabric. He pulled it on anyway, the rip in the collar leaving his left shoulder exposed.

Damn it, this is going to take too long. I should start walking back. Rain felt around in the slime for his spear, reaching out with his hands and causing small, horrible waves in the slime as he pushed his hands through it. His hand bumped into his spear, but as it did, he noticed a faint glimmer as the slime shifted. Letting go of the spear, Rain reached for the spot, feeling around and looking for the light. He saw it again and went for it, his hand feeling a small, hard grain in the otherwise mushy slush. Pulling his hand back, he opened his palm to reveal a small, white crystal.

I guess they do drop Tel, but not all the time. Well, it is something at least. It wasn't worth...this.

Picking up his spear, Rain stood and started squelching towards the torch, holding his hard-won prize in one clenched fist and his spear in the other. He felt heavy, weighed down by the oily film of filth covering him.

He stopped when he reached the torch and activated purify again, thinning the slime slightly. Before he continued, he looked up. Seeing the torchlight revealing the bare ceiling of arched stone, Rain relaxed and slumped down against the wall to take a breather. Looking left and right down the tunnel, he felt that it would be safe enough to pull up his menu. He limited himself to a few minutes of exploration, stopping frequently to look up and down the tunnel to make sure nothing was coming.

One of the first things he did was to set all of his screens to 25% transparency so he could see through them slightly, rather than having them completely block his vision. He also found an option for the statistics screen units, allowing him to confirm his math from before hadn't been far off. He set mana regeneration to display per hour but left the others on daily.

Closing his menus, he sent off another pulse of purification, then did some more math, mostly in his head, but also drawing out some slimy figures in the dust on the floor. Pulling up the skills screen, he noted his new skill point. He invested it in the winter aura, to boost his mana regeneration. *Casting a firebolt would probably be a bad idea right now, assuming that these are as flammable as the ones in the forest. Not like I have the mana for it anyway.*

He was pretty sure that the extra 10% combined with his higher clarity would be enough to offset the cost of the skill, but it was more than possible he had made a math error somewhere. Confirming the skill, he selected it. The icon that appeared was hard to describe. It was more the feeling of a sharp winter morning than it was a picture like the others, yet he could see it with his eyes. The synesthesia was a little off-putting, but he ignored it as he concentrated on the skill.

He didn't notice any visible effect, but he did feel the aura activate. It was a very subtle feeling and he felt like he could maintain it without much effort. Pulling up his statistics, he smiled and pumped his fist in the air. *Math powers!*

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|--------|-------|------|----------|
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |

| | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|-------------|
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 21.9/hr | 20.8/hr | -1/hr 10% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| | | | |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

The difference was almost trivial, but it was a net positive. He could keep this aura on at all times, passively boosting his mana regeneration, essentially for free. It would only get better if he further increased his base regeneration by investing in clarity.

Closing the menu, Rain tried to focus on his purification aura at the same time as maintaining winter, but nothing happened. *Purification* he thought, trying to switch to the skill. Winter immediately deactivated as soon as the icon changed.

Damn it, I guess that would have been too much to ask for. Seems like the rule is one aura at a time. Still, every little bit helps.

His mana slightly recovered, Rain activated purification, further thinning the slime coating him. He immediately switched back to winter and activated it. Slowly, he rose and started making his way back down the tunnel towards the waterway, no longer even bothered by the slimy feel of the stones on his feet. The floor was cleaner than he was, even with him switching to purification every few minutes whenever he had enough mana to make it worth the effort.

In this way, he retraced his steps, reaching the waterway, turning, and trudging along it. By the time he reached the bottom of the stairs he was feeling much better, merely like he had gone swimming in the brown-tinged waterway instead of a literal pile of sludge.

Rain gave out a last burst of purification, gritting his teeth as the feeling of mana exhaustion started to intensify in his skull, then switched back to winter. With relief at the sight of the sun, he started climbing back up the stairs. *Well that was fun. Like the time I stepped on a used diaper in a ball pit, except so, so much worse. I... I almost died.*

The trek back through the city was uneventful, though the streets were now much busier with the sun showing just past noon. *Or before.* Rain couldn't tell if it was rising or setting, and didn't know which way was east. He noticed people in the street giving him a wide berth, but he wasn't sure if that was due

to his torn clothing, his spear, or the smell. Way past caring about what other people thought, he entered the guild and searched for Gus. Seeing him behind one of the counters, he made his slow, tired way over, joining the end of the line of adventurers waiting at the counter. As he approached, the man waiting in front of him sniffed and looked around.

Seeing Rain, the man swore, scrunching up his nose in disgust. Almost gagging, the man decided that Rain could have this line, retreating as far away from him as he could.

Really dude? It isn't that bad now. You should have seen me a half hour ago. I can't even smell it anymore.

The others ahead of him in line apparently had stronger stomachs or more self-control, as they gave him distasteful looks but stayed in place. Nobody new seemed to be joining the line after him, though. When Rain finally reached the counter, Gus looked at him and shook his head. Rain pulled the still slightly damp quest slip from his pocket and placed it on the counter. He held up his hand, five fingers extended.

“Five.”

Gus rubbed the bridge of his nose, looking like he was developing a massive headache. He pushed the slip off of his desk with the tip of his pencil and into a bin of other discarded papers. It looked like the soggy slip of paper was all the confirmation he needed that the job was done. He dug out 5 Tel from somewhere and pushed them across to Rain. He took them gratefully and added them to his vial along with the two that were already in there.

Gus made a shooing motion and Rain was happy enough to oblige, heading off towards the room with the water barrel. He turned back at a shout. Gus was looking at him and pointing at the front door. He said something, which Rain didn't understand, but the message was clear.

Rain sighed and headed back outside. Not wanting to lug his spear through the city, he propped it against the inside of the door before he left. He debated washing himself in the fountain, but decided he'd rather not be arrested and set off in search of a bathhouse or something. He let off another burst of purification, nobody in the street seeming to notice the subtle white glow with how bright it was in the daylight.

The guild square was bustling with people. He saw a few people set up selling various things. There was a man making arrows, with a pile of finished ones sitting on a blanket next to him as well as a woman waving skewers of charred meat at passers-by as she cooked more over a small bed of coals in a cart.

Huh, this world has food trucks. He thought to himself, his mind feeling disconnected from his body as he plodded through the square.

Rain was still feeling somewhat queasy, so he passed the woman by, looking at the buildings around the square. Some appeared to be houses or apartments, but one looked like a general equipment shop. People were going in and out, some of them sporting bronze plates like Rain's own. It was easy to spot the adventurers even without the plates. They tended to stand out from the group for one reason or another. Rain was hardly an exception to this rule in his slightly damp torn t-shirt and plaid pajama pants.

I'll stop back there later and see if I can get something a bit more adventurer appropriate. Not what I need right now though. Bath first.

Continuing around the square, Rain didn't see what he was looking for, so he picked a direction and started wandering the city. Eventually, he came to a wide river which the main road crossed with a massive stone bridge. Looking up the river, Rain saw a large stone building sitting on the far side that had a canal built into it, diverting water inside.

That might be just a mill or something, but it is in the middle of the city, so I'm going to guess bathhouse.

Crossing the river, Rain turned and headed towards the building, increasingly convinced that it was a bathhouse as he saw a good number of men and women entering and leaving the building, not carrying huge sacks of grain.

As he entered, he saw a counter with an attendant and an archway leading to a large, open-ceilinged room with a huge pool set into the floor. The river entered at one end, the water pooling then flowing over a dam at the far end through a grate, presumably to the sewer system.

Rain walked up to the attendant, who greeted him with a bow and sentence that Rain couldn't parse.

“Sorry, I word no.”

Confused for a second, the attendant seemed to catch his meaning, then nodded. Gesturing to the bath, the attendant handed Rain a towel, then waved him in.

“Thank you,” Rain said. *Seems like it is free, nice.*

As he reached the bath, Rain looked around. It was an open bath, men, women, and children bathing or swimming together with no regard for modesty. Some were clothed, some not; he even saw one man scrubbing at a shirt with a washboard down near where the water tumbled through the grate to the sewers. *So more like a public beach than a bathhouse. That works.*

Rain was pretty much clean at this point, his wander through the city having given him time to regenerate sufficient mana for a few more rounds of purification. Nevertheless, he didn't *feel* clean, so, he walked to the water and, eyeing the shallow depth of the pool, jumped in with a splash, the water coming up to his knees.

The water was cool, but not too cold, and Rain quickly adapted to the temperature. He waded deeper into the pool until he was up to his neck, holding the towel above the water with one hand. Looking across to the other side of the pool, he saw some walled-off alcoves which would offer some privacy, like little private baths but connected to the main pool. Reaching into his pocket, he grabbed the little vial so it wouldn't slip out, holding it in his hand. The travel ration was long forgotten, thrown into the waterway beneath the city. He wasn't about to eat it after what it had been through, even with purify.

Rain waded his way over to one of the alcoves, and, finding it empty, entered through a gap in the stone wall where it connected to the water of the main pool. Built into the bottom of the alcove were some stone ledges that he could sit on. *It is like a little hot tub, just without the hot. I'll take it.*

Rain set the towel on the stone walkway surrounding the pool, tucking the vial of Tel underneath it to hide it from any passers-by. He then negotiated his way out of his shirt and pants, leaving his boxers on, careful not to rip the weakened fabric any further. He swished his clothes around in the water, then clambered up onto one of the stone ledges, and, standing, laid them out flat on the stone edge of the pool to dry. He then swam back out into the main pool, dunking his head under the water and scrubbing at his hair to clean out the last remnants of slime.

Heading back into his alcove, he stood in the center, the water up to his chest. He concentrated and activated purification at maximum range, which would just about cover the entire alcove. He held it for as long as he could, the pulses of light easier to see diffusing through the water than they were in the air. They rolled silently across the bottom of the pool until they bounced off the walls and dissipated.

His mana exhausted, he switched back to the soothing winter aura and arranged himself on one of the ledges to luxuriate in the feeling of being clean at last.

Still alive. He thought to himself, playing with the vial of Tel in his hand.

I... I really almost died. Rain's shiver had nothing to do with the cold water as he thought about the feeling of the slime cutting off his airway. *What am I doing? Going into a dark tunnel alone to kill monsters? Why did I think that was a good idea? Did I have a choice? Should I have taken the money Ameliah was trying to give me?*

Rain closed his eyes, thinking of the past few days. He'd woken up in a forest, been captured by bandits, and then walked what felt like hundreds of kilometers only to be abandoned in a medieval city where he didn't speak the language. He had no money, no friends, and his whole body hurt. *Actually not that much worse than my old life, now that I think about it. Just trade death by runaway excavator with death by slime monster and you are pretty much there. You have to be pretty dumb to get run over by a piece of construction equipment on site, so what does that say about me?*

Rain sighed and slid off the ledge. Taking a breath, he dunked himself down under the surface and let the cool water wash away his negative thoughts. *No. I won't slip back into my old life. I can cast magic now, and a slime can't really kill me, not as long as I have mana. I'll only get stronger from here, this is only the beginning.*

Breaking the surface, Rain leaned back, his feet leaving the bottom of the pool as he let his worries go. He floated on the cool water and let his mind go blissfully blank.

9: Commerce

Rain rested in the pool until the grumbling of his stomach overpowered his inclination to just float there for the rest of the afternoon. He wasn't thirsty, having drunk from the pool after purifying the water for a few moments in his cupped hands. He trusted the skill to clear out any pathogens that might be lurking in the pool but still wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of drinking bath water. The water was flowing in from the river, so he had decided that it wasn't really as bad as all that, especially once he had purified it.

He climbed out of the pool and toweled off, shivering and pulling on his tattered pants and shirt, which were still slightly damp. The leather cord around his neck with his bronze adventurer's plate hanging from it had held up better to the slime's digestive juices than his cotton garments had. He decided to hold the little vial of Tel, rather than slipping it into his pocket. He didn't trust the seam to hold, and losing it would be catastrophic.

Walking carefully around the edge of the pool, Rain looked at his vitals, seeing that his mana had risen to around 25% while his stamina was hovering at around half. His health had recovered a little bit as well, but he still wasn't quite at full. His skin felt tight and itchy like he'd gotten a decent sunburn.

He approached the attendant to return the towel but saw that there was a small line. Content to wait, Rain got in line and watched as those in front of him handed the attendant a small brownish coin before retrieving their towels and heading into the bath.

As Rain got to the front of the line, the attendant seemed to remember him and smiled. Rain tried to hand him the towel, but the man held up his hands and pointed at a basket near the exit of the building. Nodding to show he understood, Rain pointed to one of the coins sitting on the desk, then asked:

“Bronze?”

The man just smiled and pointed at the plate hanging from Rain's neck. “Bronze,” he said. Then, pointing at a coin, said a different word.

“Copper?” Rain repeated, and the man nodded.

Still confused at why he didn't have to pay, Rain asked. “I you copper?” he indicated the coins then gestured to the bath.

The man shook his head and shrugged. “Bronze <something> adventurers <something> for <something>.”

Oh, adventurers get in free. Nice.

“Thank you,” Rain said, turning and walking to drop his towel in the basket. Halfway there, he turned back to the attendant and held up the towel to point at it.

“Word?” Rain asked.

“Towel,” the man responded, and Rain filed it away. He was pretty sure that he was starting to forget words, but he would never learn them if he didn't ask. Rain thanked the man again and deposited his towel in the basket before heading out into the evening sun.

His stomach was complaining loudly at this point, so Rain followed his nose, eventually finding what looked like an inn and entering the common room. Several people looked up as he entered, a few of them doing a double take at his tattered clothes and watching him as he moved across the room towards a table. As he sat, a woman walked up to him, apparently a waitress, and asked him a question. Not understanding, he shook his head.

“Food?” he asked.

The woman eyed him skeptically. “<Something> copper,” she said, looking at his tattered clothing.

I guess I pay before I get my food if I look like a vagabond. I don't have any of those copper coins though. Rain uncorked his vial and picked out a Tel, holding it up in his palm for her to see.

“Tel?” he asked, hopefully.

The woman sighed and grumbled something which sounded like it had the word adventurer in it, but she took the Tel and disappeared into another room. She returned in a few moments with a huge bowl of stew and a loaf of bread. She set them down on the table in front of Rain, then she surprised him by handing him a handful of copper coins.

“Thank you,” Rain said. The woman just harrumphed and went over to take an order from another patron.

Rain inspected the coins while he waited for his stew to cool, seeing that there were two different kinds. She had given him two large-ish coins with an unknown face on one side and the number 5 on the other, as well as two smaller ones with the image of a bird and an unknown character.

I'll call that “1” for now. So 12 copper is my change, but how much did this soup cost? Less than 1 Tel apparently. Mmm, this smells amazing.

Rain started eating the soup, finding that the taste, while not quite as good as the smell, was agreeable. He tore off bits of the bread, dunking them in the soup and taking huge bites. Looking around the room, he saw a few people watching him, who quickly looked away.

Humm, so adventurers aren't all that common away from the guild, or maybe I just stick out. Good to know I guess. Places like this inn and the baths use copper for currency and people give you the stink eye if you try to pay with crystal. I guess using Tel is just an adventurer thing. Makes sense I guess, they drop from monsters and aren't as convenient to carry around as coins anyway.

Finishing off his stew and bread, Rain leaned back, satisfied. As hungry as he had been, the stew was filling and he felt quite full. Looking down at the film of stew remaining in his bowl that he hadn't been able to sop up with the bread, Rain decided to try something.

Purify.

Rain concentrated, watching the remains of the stew disappear, leaving the bowl spotless after ten seconds or so of effort. *So convenient!* Relaxing, he smiled and looked up to see that the entire inn had gone quiet, everyone watching him. *Oops.*

Rain blushed a bit and stood. Looking at the coins in his hand, he decided to leave the two smaller ones on the table as a tip as compensation for the disturbance. He wasn't sure if tipping was a thing in this world, or if 2 copper was generous or insulting. He decided to do it anyway on the principle of something being better than nothing.

The patrons watched him warily as he walked to the exit, the waitress just giving a long-suffering sigh as she went to collect his bowl.

Was that really a big deal? Experience can't be that hard to get, these people should have skills or magic too. Everyone should, but I haven't seen any magic other than what Brovose and Ameliah used, and whatever that stab move of Hegar's was. What makes adventurers different? I mean, not everyone is going to be able to kill a slime, sure, but what about that training experience I got before? Why can't they level up from that? Gah! I wish I could just ask someone this stuff without having to use interpretive dance!

Rain caught his thoughts wandering off into the weeds again and he jerked his focus back to his present situation. He was getting a lot of odd looks from passers-by as he stood there in the middle of the street. This part of the city seemed to be mostly residential, and his bronze plate and torn shirt were drawing some unwanted attention his way. Rain tucked his plate inside his shirt and started off down the road, feeling that it was better to be confused for a hobo than an adventurer for what he had in mind.

He needed some clothes, but he didn't have a lot of money, or at least he didn't think he did. He still wasn't sure. He wanted to ask for directions to somewhere he could buy clothes, but he didn't want to be directed to an adventurer's shop like the one he had seen in the guild square. He had gotten the feeling that adventurers would have access to more money than the average towns person, and he didn't want to pay for top tier adventurer gear when all he really needed was basic clothing.

After walking for a little while aimlessly, Rain saw a tidy looking older man approaching from the direction he was walking. Stopping, Rain tried to look non-threatening as he spoke to the man.

“Hello?”

The man stopped, regarding Rain with a curious expression.

“Hello,” the man replied uncertainly.

“Hello. I no words, sorry. I... shirt, pants... shoes. I... copper?” Rain attempted.

The man looked confused, and a little sad. He dug around in a pocket, retrieving one of the smaller copper coins and tried to place it into Rain's hand.

“No,” Rain said, gently pushing the coin away. *Damn it, he thinks I'm begging.* Pulling the two large copper coins from his pocket, he showed them to the man and tried again.

“No, I copper,” he said, holding up the coins. “I no shoes. I... shirt. Bad shirt.” Rain pointed to the torn shoulder of his shirt. Seeing that the man still looked confused, Rain mimed looking around the city, holding his hand to his eyes as if shielding them the sun, then, he shrugged.

A flicker of comprehension crossed the man's face as he spoke. “You <something> shirt <something>? Shoes?”

Rain nodded, hoping the man had understood what he was getting at. It seemed that he had, as the man beckoned for him to follow. He was speaking to Rain in a calm voice, though Rain couldn't decipher much of what the man was saying. *Smile and nod. Smile and nod. Man, I hope he understood what I wanted and he isn't taking me somewhere strange.*

After only a block or so, the man stopped and pointed down a road. Rain looked and saw that a few streets over there was a large pavilion with a huge crowd of people milling about various stands and store displays.

Rain thanked the old man and left him there, looking bemused, as he headed towards the market square. He immediately went up to a stand where a man and his young daughter were tending a display of basic workman's clothing. Rain eyed the merchant as he approached. He was a stout, bald man with an extravagant curled mustache wearing a flamboyant orange robe. His appearance was completely at odds with his inventory which consisted of the normal browns, greens, and whites that he saw most of the common citizens wearing.

Seeing him approach, the man practically teleported in front of him, so quickly did he pounce on a potential customer. He snapped his fingers at his daughter, who Rain estimated to be around 6 or 7 years old, pointing at a pile of shirts. He then walked up to Rain and, sizing him up, turned to a pile of pants, selecting a pair and holding it up to him to check the size. He quickly placed it down and selected another. Thankfully, it seemed that this energetic man was more than happy to decide for himself what Rain needed, rather than waiting for him to ask.

Rain thought this behavior seemed a little bit odd. Honestly, the merchant seemed to be going out of his way to make a sale to someone who, by all appearances, was unlikely to have any money. His guild plate was hidden by his shirt, torn though it was, and there was nothing else about him that would suggest he was capable of paying for so much as a crust of bread. Rain wasn't about to complain though.

The girl brought over a white linen shirt that looked to be about his size, handing it to her father. He held it up, checking the fit, and nodded at her, smiling. He spun her around and pushed her towards a pile of socks. She went to get some and the man held up yet another different pair of pants. Seemingly satisfied, he threw them over the arm where he was holding the shirt, then said something to Rain.

Rain's look of confusion didn't seem to slow the man down at all as he pulled a chair out from behind his stall and practically pushed Rain down into it. The girl came over with a pair of socks and a measuring stick. Grabbing one of Rain's feet, the merchant took the measuring stick from the girl and sized up Rain's foot, nodding to himself. He picked out a large pair of rugged boots and shooed Rain off the chair, setting down all of the various items of clothing he was holding. The man spun to face Rain, a hungry look in his eyes.

He said something to Rain, then tilted his head at his look of confusion, apparently not even having noticed that Rain didn't speak the language when he had asked him to sit in the chair before. To Rain's surprise, the man switched to a different language, this one consisting of flowing syllables and no break between words. *That might not be the language though, just how this guy talks.* Rain just shook his head.

“English? Do you speak English? Hello, my name is Rain, can you understand me?” Rain said in English. He was trying to give the man a long enough sentence, hoping that he might pick up a word or two.

The man laughed, shaking his head. If anything, he only appeared more energetic and happy. *What is with this guy?* Rain thought as the merchant clapped and wiggled his fingers excitedly. He noticed the man's daughter roll her eyes exaggeratedly at this. Rain couldn't help but smile at the scene. *I don't know what I was expecting from clothes shopping, but this wasn't it.*

The merchant, undeterred by the language barrier, motioned to Rain, then the pile of clothing, his hand open as if to ask ‘like what you see?’. *He is surprisingly easy to understand. Maybe it's a skill? No, probably not. There's no charisma stat after all.*

Rain nodded. The man clapped, then retrieved a money pouch from one of the pockets of his voluminous robe. Removing a smallish copper bar and a smaller square copper tile from the bag, he held them up in one hand. With his other hand, he indicating the clothes, then made a balancing motion.

Is that what he wants for them? I have no idea how much that is.

Digging in his pocket, Rain traded the vial of Tel that he had been hiding in his closed hand for the two large copper coins. He wasn't hopeful, as the tile and bar that the man was holding were bigger than the coins and they were also inscribed with some symbols. This indicated to Rain that they were an official currency, not just random lumps of metal. Rain held his coins out to the man, hoping that he wouldn't be offended by the offer.

Instead of getting offended, the man just laughed merrily and shook his head again. Holding up a finger, he signaled for Rain to wait and retrieved a folding table from his stall, setting it between them. He opened his pouch again, starting to lay out coins. Motioning to his daughter, he had her come over and sort the coins out into piles by type.

Pointing to the pile of smallest coins, the merchant held one up, then nudged his daughter, who said a word. He nodded, smiling proudly, then pointed to the pile of larger coins. “Five,” his daughter said, and the merchant counted out five of the small coins, laying them next to one of the larger ones. *Oh, I get what he is doing now.*

He pointed at one of the little metal tiles. It was about 3cm on a side and a centimeter thick. The face of the tile had been stamped with the image of a city. The girl quickly said a number that Rain determined to be 20 when the merchant set up 4 of the large coins against one of the tiles. The small bar was slightly narrower and thinner than the tile, but twice as long. It was identified as 50 copper when the man lined one up against two of the tiles and two of the large coins. The bar had three images stamped on it, a sword, a crown, and a throne, along with some text Rain couldn't read.

The man looked at Rain expectantly, his daughter beaming, proud that she had gotten all of the denominations correct. *He wants a bar and a tile, so 70 copper; huh? I don't have anywhere near that. I don't think I could bargain him down that much, so I guess it is time to find out what a Tel is worth.*

Rain held up a hand to the man to signal for him to wait, then turned his back, fishing the vial of Tel out from his pocket and hiding it from the man. He didn't want him to know how much money he had. While he found it hard to believe that the beaming man would try to cheat him in front of his young daughter, he nonetheless decided to be careful.

Removing a single Tel and hiding the vial in his fist, Rain turned back to the man and placed the Tel on the table. The man's eyes flashed and he turned to his daughter. "Tel," she said, looking a little uncertain. The merchant encouraged her gently and she made a guess at the value, speaking a number Rain didn't know.

"No," the merchant said, in a kindly tone, holding up a finger, then motioned for her to try again. She tried again and this time she seemed to have gotten it, as the man ruffled her hair and paired the Tel with two of the large coins and four of the smaller ones. The Tel looked tiny next to the coins, around the size of a grain of rice. Rain noticed that the man was careful to not touch the Tel as he moved the coins around, leaving it on the side of the table near Rain.

14 copper to the Tel... I have 6 Tel plus ten copper so that is... 94? Ok, time to make a real offer.

Discreetly removing 3 more Tel from the vial, he placed them next to the lone Tel on the table. He then added his two copper coins, bringing the total up to 66 copper. The man laughed and smiled, clapping Rain on the shoulder. He swept up all the coins back into his pouch, then, carefully picked up the Tel and added them to a little vial of his own, which he then slipped into the pouch.

He grabbed a thin linen sack, scooped up the pile of clothes, and dumped them inside. He then picked up the boots and thrust them and the bag into Rain's arms. Rain thanked the man, who smiled and bowed as Rain walked dazedly back towards the adventurer's guild, trying to recover from the merchant's frenzied personality.

...What...just happened?

Rain had to stop and ask for directions twice, but he managed to find his way back to the guild just as the sun was setting. Seeing his spear lying on the ground outside the door a few meters from where he had propped it up, he detoured slightly on his way in to collect it.

He entered the main room, which was still busy, though the adventurers looked slightly more ragged. They had probably completed their own quests for the day and returned to the guild to turn them in.

He walked to the bathroom and shut the door. After using the toilet, he checked his mana, then turned his purify aura on at full blast, extending it to the full two-meter range to fill the bathroom. He could feel his mana starting to tick down, but he ignored it, feeling safe in the guild and confident that his regeneration would have him back to full by the time he had to go out again.

Opening the sack, he reached inside and proceeded to change into his new clothes. With mixed feelings, he noticed that a new pair of underwear had gotten into the pile at some point without him noticing. He was going to miss his cotton boxers, but they were falling apart and linen wasn't really too bad he supposed.

He slipped his feet into his new boots, finding that they fit snugly, but not so tight as to be uncomfortable. The leather of the boots was stiff, but would probably soften as he wore them in. The boots didn't have laces. Instead, there was a leather strap with a buckle, which he tightened to keep them secure on his feet.

Standing, he examined himself as best he could without a mirror in the suddenly much cleaner bathroom. *Now, this is much better* he thought to himself. The pants were soft leather and dark brown. The shirt was linen with long sleeves and wooden buttons up the front. It wasn't as comfortable as his cotton t-shirt had been, but the linen didn't feel too bad against his skin. All in all, Rain was happy with his purchase and happier still at his impromptu tutorial on the coinage of the city. He stuffed his old clothes into the linen sack and slung it over his shoulder.

Seeing that his mana was getting a little low, Rain deactivated his aura, switching back to winter. He exited the bathroom, grabbing his spear from where he had propped it while changing. He headed towards the tavern to see if he could get something to eat from the bar. It turned out that he could, trading 1 Tel for 4 of the rock hard ration bricks. He could have gotten a proper meal of roast chicken and vegetables with ale, but he wasn't about to spend a full Tel on a single meal, not when he only had two to his name. The ration bricks would be good training for his teeth and it seemed he had been right about the prices of things near the guild. Luckily, there had been a pile of them on the counter, so Rain didn't have much trouble conveying to the barman what he wanted. It seemed that the bricks were a guild special and that they weren't very popular.

Scanning the room, Rain didn't see Gus anywhere. He hadn't been manning one of the counters at the entrance, so Rain supposed he had gone home, his shift over. He filled a mug of water from the barrel, resisting the urge to activate his purification aura again. It was a lot easier after his experience in the sewers. Compared to that, what was the thought of unwashed hands touching the ladle?

There were no empty tables in the room, so he walked over to a largish one with only a few people seated at the far end. They didn't seem to mind as he took a chair at the other end, so he set down his bag, adding three of the ration bars to it, still in their paper wrapping, and keeping the fourth out to eat. Gnawing on the ration and feeling like a beaver, he listened to the conversation between the others at his table, trying to follow their words to glean a bit more about the language. Mostly, though, he just worked on his ration bar and reflected on the day and his plans for the future. Slowly, people started filtering from the room until finally the barman came over to him.

Already familiar with Rain's linguistic limitations from when he had purchased the rations, the large bearded man kept his language simple.

“Sleep <something> adventurer's guild?” the barman asked.

Rain nodded. That was indeed his plan.

“<Something> Tel,” said the barman, holding up two fingers.

Rain paled. *Shit, I don't have enough.*

Silently, Rain pulled out his vial, un-stoppered it, and shook out his single remaining Tel into his hand. He looked at the barman with a glum look. *Maybe I can go find an inn or something? I don't want to sleep under a bush. No guarantee that an inn would be any cheaper though...*

Rain must have looked pretty pathetic, as the barman sighed and gave him a nod of acceptance. He took the Tel from his palm and waved him towards the door. Rain got to his feet, collected his spear, slipped the empty vial into a pocket, and walked to the bunk room. He unstrapped and removed his new boots, tucked them under a bunk along with his spear and his bag, climbed under the covers and went to sleep.

10: Broke

| Training Overview |
|----------------------------------|
| <u>General Experience Earned</u> |
| Health Use: 10 |
| Stamina Use: 45 |
| Mana Use: 142 |
| <u>Skill Experience Earned</u> |
| Refrigerate: 103 [Rank Up] |
| Extend Aura: 5 |
| Purify: 31 |
| Winter: 3 |

Rain thrashed and jerked to a sitting position as the blue screen barged into his dream and dragged him back to consciousness. Angrily, he raised a hand to swipe it out of the way, but stopped, noticing that there were considerably more notifications listed than he had seen before. Blinking his watering eyes ineffectually, Rain tried to digest the message as his pupils slowly contracted in response to the light. Dragging the dialog to one side, he pulled up his skills menu to check the effect of the rank up.

| Skills |
|---|
| Refrigerate (2/10) Exp: 3/200 15-17 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment Sufficient damage causes slow Range: 2 meters Cost: 10 mp/s |
| Extend Aura (1/10) Exp: 5/100 Extend aura range by 1 meter Multiply aura mana cost by 120% |
| Purify (1/10) Exp: 31/100 Purify poison, corruption, and contamination Range: 1 meter Cost: 10 mp/min |
| Winter (1/10) Exp: 3/100 Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities Range: 1 meter Cost: 1 mp/hr |
| Free Skill Points: 0 |

Rain sat and thought as he looked through his skills screen, comparing it against the dialog.

So skills get experience when you use them, and on top of that I get experience for using stamina, mana, and health. Good, I can level up both my skills and my stats just by practicing. I don't have to go kill things if I don't want to. Rank 2 on refrigerate... looks like everything doubled, including the range. Experience to the next level is doubled as well. Makes sense I guess. Is it linear, or is it going to be 400 for the next one? I hope the cost isn't going to double every rank, that would get out of hand pretty quick.

Dismissing all of his menus, Rain sat back and smiled, happy with his choice to invest in mana regeneration. His aura did decent damage, but it gobbled up mana like a pig. Being able to recover quickly was more important to him than boosting the damage by a point or two. The skill rank up had doubled the damage in contrast to what he had seen earlier when he had been experimenting with focus. That had only increased it by a point or two, probably running on some formula.

It was now feasible to take out a slime with his aura alone. He had already done that once when it was still rank 1, but that hadn't really been a viable fighting strategy. Now, with the enhanced range, he was sure that he could run circles around a slime while his aura did the heavy lifting.

Looks like skills gain experience based on mana used, not time used, otherwise winter would be much higher. That means low mana use skills are going to take a long time to level.

Rain concentrated and activated his winter aura, which had been deactivated when he fell asleep. He was at full mana, his natural regen having restored all three of his pools overnight, but he saw no reason to not leave winter on whenever he could. In fact, he was probably going to be in the guild for a little bit anyway, so he might as well use up some mana right away so he wasn't just sitting at the cap. *The more mana I use, the more experience I get.*

Predicting that activating refrigerate in the bunk room would cause a bit of a kerfuffle, Rain instead used purify, pushing in extra mana to extend the range. The soft white pulses were visible in the dim room, which was not yet fully lit by the rising sun. His activation of the aura caused a few turned heads, but it was nothing like the reaction he had gotten in the inn. It seemed adventurers were used to this kind of thing. One mage-looking fellow even walked over to stand in the aura, taking the opportunity for a free dry-cleaning of his travel-stained orange robe.

Rain kept the aura on as he swung his feet out of bed, slipping them into his boots and buckling them. He stretched, looking at the circular expanse of dirt-free floorboards that was slowly forming around his bunk. Smiling, he stood, running his tongue over his teeth, marveling at how they felt clean and smooth. Purify apparently worked on tartar. *Well, I guess I can take 'find a toothbrush' off the list.*

Rain knelt down and retrieved his bag and spear from under the bed. The bag didn't have a handle or a strap, unfortunately, so he had to carry it in one hand and the spear in the other. Straightening, Rain checked his mana and deactivated purify. The mage in the now pristine orange robe gave him a nod of thanks and wandered out of the room.

Rain followed him out, continuing to the quest hall to check the board. There was a bit of a line, so Rain had a little time to plan out what he wanted to do with his day. Belatedly, he forgot that he should be using winter, so he activated it again, extending the range. The added cost was trivial given the low

base mana consumption. Pulling up his status screen, he quickly verified that it was still giving him back more mana than the skill cost him.

The mage was in front of him in line for the board, and he looked back at Rain as he activated the skill. Nobody else in the hall seemed to notice that he was using an aura. The mage, who was within the range of the aura, gave him a thumbs up, then looked back towards the board.

My pleasure. Ok, priorities.

1. *Don't die: I'm still alive, so doing ok on this one for now.*
2. *Food: I have enough bricks to build a very small pyramid. Enough to last a day.*
3. *Money: Haha, nope.*

Rain silently added a fourth item to the list: learn to talk. He then returned to thinking about how to address the third. The board was the first step of his plan. He would find a quest, get Gus to explain it, go do it, then turn it in for profit.

Just need to get two Tel by tonight so I can rent a bunk. Three if I want to pay back the bartender, whose name I really should learn.

Seeing that there was now enough space to reach the board, Rain pushed forward. He was careful not to stick anyone with his spear, though he doubted the wooden point could do anyone any real damage. Reaching the board, he scanned over the posted quests. Most of it went over his head, but he did recognize the sword symbol on the top of one bill near the middle of the board. Taking it down, he saw a drawing of a crab, along with a number which he was pretty sure wasn't 5. Shrugging, Rain took the quest posting over to Gus, who was thankfully back at his counter.

Gus did a double take as Rain approached, taking in his new outfit. He tilted his head and nodded as if to say 'not bad', taking the quest paper from Rain. As he looked at it, he frowned, then shook his head.

"What <something> <something> you?" Gus asked him, sighing. He had a sort of awkward expression on his face and he was keeping his voice down for some reason.

"What?" Rain asked.

Gus sighed again, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Slime <something>," Gus said, holding up a single finger.

"Gus <something>," he continued, holding up 8 fingers, clearly looking uncomfortable.

"Rain <something>?..." he asked. *Level? Does he mean level? Slimes are level 1, so sure, he probably wants to know my level.*

Rain held up three fingers, Gus nodded, then pointed at the crab. "Level <something>," he said, holding up 10 fingers, pausing, then two more, lowering the others. *Crab monsters are level 12, got it. No fighting giant enemy crabs for me.*

Gus beckoned to him, taking the quest back to the board and pinning it back in the middle. He gestured towards the very bottom of the board, saying “yes,” then the middle, “no,” then the top “very no.” Hesitantly, Rain reached out and took the very lowest quest on the board. Gus took it from him, glanced at it, and shook his head. “Five,” he said, holding up five fingers.

“Shit. No quest?” Rain said.

Gus shrugged and headed back to his counter, seeing that he had an irritated-looking woman waiting in line and glaring at him. “Sorry,” he said over his shoulder to Rain.

Shit fuck! I'm too low level for all of these. Maybe I could join a party? Rain looked around the room, but there didn't seem to be anyone looking for more members, and he didn't have the words to ask. *Everyone in here looks really strong. I would just slow them down, probably why Hegar and the others left me here. I don't really blame them. I suppose I should be a little thankful to them for bringing a strange man they found in the woods with them to the city in the first place, even if they did tie me up the moment they met me.*

Rain walked over to one of the benches and sat down to think. *Ok, I need to level and I need Tel. I know one place that I can get both of those things, even if I really don't want to go back down there. Ok slimes, watch out, you won't get the drop on me this time.*

Rain smirked at his own terrible pun, trying to distract himself from the thought of how he had almost died when the slime had dropped down on top of him. He was confident that with his powered up aura he would be fine as long as he kept his mana above a quarter. Half, to be safe. Seeing that the angry woman had left, he stood and walked over to Gus and informed him of his plans. “I go under. Kill slime.”

At Rain's proclamation, Gus raised an eyebrow and then shrugged. *Good, he isn't going to stop me, guess it is ok to go down there without a quest. Now let's see if I can be a bit smarter about this.*

Rain pointed at a barrel of unlit torches by the door, then himself.

“Five copper,” Gus said.

“Gus,” Rain replied, giving him a level look. “Ameliah,” he added, reminding the man of his arrangement with her.

Gus sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose again.

“Ok, Ok,” Gus said, Rain tentatively identifying the word as Gus waved him over to the barrel. Rain smiled, walking over to grab a torch. Considering his bag for a moment, he managed to work his spear through the linen, turning his shoddy spear into a makeshift bundle. Sturdy boots on his feet, bundle in one hand, torch in the other, Rain set off to kill some shit.

Now I feel like a proper murder hobo. He laughed to himself, getting some odd looks as he exited the guild.

Coming to the entrance of the sewers, Rain hesitated briefly, then forced himself to continue. He knew that if he didn't face his fear now he might never venture into the dark again. He had a torch, he would

look up, he would be fine. These were the thoughts he repeated to himself as he descended the stairs. *Even if another one lands on me, I'll just use refrigerate and keep my mouth shut instead of trying to breathe the disgusting slime monster.*

Reaching the bottom, Rain silently gave thanks to his nice, new boots. He didn't want to light the torch yet, so he waited a few minutes for his eyes to adjust to the dim light of the sewer. While he waited, he activated his purification aura to clean up the stain at the bottom of the stairs. *Wouldn't want someone to slip.* He killed the aura after a few minutes, switching back to winter.

He then set off down the tunnel, upstream this time to cover new ground. He held his torch in front of him like a club, his spear with the bag hanging from it over his shoulder.

Plan A: find slime, close to three meters, extend refrigerate until dead, purify until clean, rest, lather, rinse, repeat.

Rain proceeded down the tunnel, before long hearing the unmistakable sound of a slime ahead. He still hadn't lit his torch, the sconces on the wall giving off enough light for the moment. Having the time, he set his torch down, converted his bundle back into a spear, and warily approached the noise while making sure to look in every direction, including up. Catching sight of the slime, he let it come to him and once he judged it to be in range, quickly switched to refrigerate and turned it on at full blast.

A wave of frost shot out from Rain's feet along the damp stone, quickly closing the distance to the slime, which immediately started to freeze. Rain watched his mana drop, but it wasn't falling anywhere near as fast as the slime's health. After only a few seconds, the slime's health dropped to zero and Rain dropped his aura. The slime was slowly sliding apart into a slushy pile of greenish ick. Shards of frozen sludge had torn holes through the slime's membrane and were dropping to the ground as it lost cohesion.

You have defeated [Slime], Level 1
25 Experience Earned

Now that is more like it! Rain celebrated at his victory, then switched on purification. Checking his mana, he estimated that it had taken around four seconds to kill the slime. He decided he would leave purification on for a few minutes to clean up the worst of the mess, then go look and see if it had dropped a Tel. This method would take about 50 mana per slime, meaning he could do it safely twice before stopping to wait for his mana to refill. He was gaining just over 20 mana an hour with winter active, so every three hours or so he would get one more attempt.

Rain's smile grew even wider as he glimpsed the shine of a Tel below the sludge as it slowly dissolved under the onslaught of purification.

And so, Rain hunted slimes. He kept at it for hours, killing every last slime he found without getting a single drop of goo on his new clothes. There seemed to be more slimes in the direction he had chosen this time around. In total, he had found a large group of four slimes, one pair, and two more that were on their own like the first. He was a bit concerned when he saw the large group, but his aura didn't care about the numbers and took down all four just as quickly as it had the first slime he had encountered.

Of the nine slimes, only six had dropped a Tel. Still, that was way better than he had been expecting and Rain was smiling as he strolled back through the sewer. He hadn't even needed the torch. He'd leveled up as well, immediately dumping his points into clarity to further boost his regeneration. He hadn't decided what to do with his skill point yet, mulling over his options. He kept his menus closed as he walked, however, occasionally glancing up to make sure that nothing was lurking on the arched stone ceiling of the tunnel.

More mana, more experience!

As mottos went, Rain thought it could use some work, but he was still feeling pretty good as he climbed the stairs back up to the city. When he reached street level, he saw that it was only mid-afternoon. He wandered through the city, exploring, buying some meat on a stick from a vendor and a proper backpack to replace his hobo bindle. This and a few other things set him back only 10 copper, leaving him with 5 Tel and 4 copper in his nice new money pouch.

He was whistling as he returned to the guild, feeling happier than he had since before he had woken up in the forest, perhaps even the happiest he had felt since before his mother had died two years ago. He walked into the quest hall, as he had decided to dub the room, then proceeded over to the board. As before, there were a few adventurers and townsfolk about. Looking at the board, he saw that it was fairly picked over, with only a few quests remaining. He noticed one with a picture of a slime, but it was posted near the middle of the board, not the bottom, so he ignored it. The quest with the crabs was gone.

Looking around, he saw the barrel of torches and debated returning the one he had took, but decided to keep it. His pack had a loop for it, and he might need it if he decided to hunt slimes again tomorrow. *Ameliah gave Gus quite a few Tel to look after me, so I don't feel bad about keeping it. The barman, though, him I should pay back.*

Walking into the tavern, Rain saw the barman from yesterday talking to a group of adventurers over in a corner. There was a woman in the standard guild blue behind the bar serving drinks, and another man waiting tables. Rain watched as he walked behind the bar and into the kitchen before returning with plates piled high with some roast meat.

Rain wandered over to the bar, deciding to get a mug of water while he waited for the bearded barman to finish his conversation. Reaching the barrel, he absently activated purify as he had mana to spare. He watched the cleansing light wash over the rim and drift down through the water as he filled his mug with the ladle. *How does this skill define what gets removed and what doesn't?* He wondered deactivating the skill. Nobody seemed to have noticed his aura use, or if they did, they didn't care. There was a man over in the corner juggling fire and laughing with his friends, so casual skill use in the guild seemed to be ok.

Rain sat at the bar and surveyed the room. He saw that the barman had finished his conversation and was headed his way. The man was dressed in the blue of the guild, but he also had a silver plate hanging around his neck. That wasn't something he had seen on any of the other guild employees, though not all adventurers wore their plates in the open. His large black beard was well trimmed and compensated well for the lack of hair on his scalp.

Rain hopped up off his stool and waved at the man. "Thank you," he said, offering the man a single Tel. The man took it and smiled, then punched Rain in the shoulder. *Ow, that actually did some damage. My health dropped a little bit. Oh well, I'm sure he didn't mean it as an attack.* Rubbing his shoulder, Rain smiled back at the man.

"Rain," he said, pointing at himself.

"Khurt," the man named himself, guiding Rain back to the bar and flagging down the server, who brought two mugs of beer over to them. Rain took a polite sip at his, trying to decide if he liked the taste. It was deep and complex, the liquid a dark black color in the mug. Rain had never been much of a drinker, mostly just in social situations, but he could appreciate that this was good beer. He thanked Khurt again, pointing at the beer and giving him a thumbs up. Khurt smiled and clunked his mug against Rain's before taking a long drink from it.

Mentally, Rain upgraded Khurt from barman to tavern keeper. He just ticked off too many of the checkboxes to be anything else. Khurt asked him a question, and it took a fair amount of pantomime to figure out what he meant, Rain learning several new words in the process. He had asked what quest Rain had done to earn the money. Rain excruciatingly explained that it hadn't been a quest and that he had gone into the sewers to hunt slimes. He even showed him the remaining 4 Tel sitting in his vial. He found that he liked Khurt, who was quite patient with his caveman dialect.

He even managed to learn the numbers 1 through 10 from the man. Rain had grown tired of playing the finger game over the course of explaining the battles with the slimes, so once he had finished the tale he had used some basic miming to ask Khurt for a pencil and piece of paper. He then went through the numbers, holding up fingers and asking Khurt for the word. He wrote down the Arabic numerals and filled in the phonetic pronunciation next to them. Khurt helpfully added the symbol for each number next to the familiar Arabic one. Khurt sat with him for a while, Rain asking for words and filling the rest of the paper with phonetic translations.

Rain was starting to feel a bit like he was being a bother after about a half hour, though Khurt was showing nothing but patience. Nonetheless, Rain decided to call it there, standing up and thanking Khurt for his help. Khurt punched him again (*dude, ow*) and even dug out a few more sheets of paper for him from behind the bar before wandering off into the kitchen.

Rain retreated to a table and pored over his notes, studying the words and trying to keep them all in his head. He was met with mixed success. Having focused on the numbers, he was feeling like he was starting to get a decent handle on them, but it still took him a while to recall the exact one he wanted. He kept at it until his eyes started to feel gritty and people were filtering out of the tavern. Getting up, he stretched, waved to Khurt, and made his way out of the tavern and into the training room. It was deserted, so Rain dropped his spear and pack by the door and activated his aura at full blast.

He was using purification, deciding that if he was just dumping his mana to train he might as well be useful at the same time. He walked through the room until he was completely out of mana and all the dust and dirt had been scoured from the stone floor and halfway up the walls. He had started with practically a full bar, having recovered quite a bit since his adventure in the sewers. He took the opportunity to investigate the mechanics of the aura. It took care of dirt, dust, and ash, but it didn't do anything for the deep charring in one of the dummies or the gashes in another. It wasn't a cure-all; it did pretty much what he could have with a mop and bucket of soapy water, just much faster. From the description, he felt that it would also help with being poisoned, but he wasn't keen to test that. He did

notice that the aura wouldn't pass through the walls. Instead, it spilled out through the door and created a small clean semi-circle in the hallway. It appeared that the aura behaved like a liquid, or maybe a gas, expanding in all directions until it reached its maximum range or came into contact with something.

Rain wanted to test his other two auras to see if they acted the same way, but he didn't have the mana for refrigerate and winter didn't have a visible effect to indicate where it stopped. He activated winter anyway, the soothing feeling of the aura helping with his pounding head. He had determined that he started to get a headache whenever he dropped below ten mana or so, worsening as he approached zero.

Picking up his pack and spear, Rain went to go find Khurt so he could pay the fee to use the bunk room. He was stopped by an older woman in guild blue, the same one who had taken care of them on his first day in the guild. She was walking down the hall, extinguishing lamps and looking in rooms before closing the doors.

“Two Tel <something> bed, <something> outside,” she said.

Fishing out 2 Tel, he handed them to the woman, then made his way to the bunk-room, feeling tired, but happy at his progress. He had started the day flat broke, but now he had 2 Tel and 4 copper in his pocket, a pack holding his old clothes, language notes, and a single remaining nutritional brick. Rain was smiling as he drifted off to sleep.

11: UX

| Training Overview |
|----------------------------------|
| <u>General Experience Earned</u> |
| Health Use: 1 |
| Stamina Use: 52 |
| Mana Use: 231 |
| <u>Skill Experience Earned</u> |
| Refrigerate: 80 |
| Extend Aura: 40 |
| Purify: 103 [Rank Up] |
| Winter: 8 |

“Son of a...!”

Rain cursed as the piercing blue light terminated his rest with extreme prejudice. Finding himself suddenly awake, his poor eyes stinging and watering from the light, Rain mentally added doing something about the dialogs to his priority list. He placed it at number one, bumping ‘stay alive’ down to number two temporarily.

Rain waited out the pain, his closed eyes doing nothing whatsoever to reduce the brightness of the dialog. After a few more seconds his eyes had adapted to the glare sufficiently for him to read the text. His anger at his method of awakening was slowly mollified as he reviewed the experience he had gained. He was particularly pleased about the rank up for purify. He dismissed the dialog and immediately opened his options menu to kill it for good.

Touching ‘customize HUD’ and digging through the menu, he found a few settings for status dialogs. As he had noticed before, this menu was uncannily intuitive. He had a sense of what each option would do, even without a printed description. He messed around for a little bit, changing notifications from ‘safe’ to ‘immediate’, which he intuited would cause a dialog to appear immediately in his face whenever he defeated an enemy.

This would have been awful when fighting more than one foe at a time had he not also changed the notification mode from ‘visual’ to ‘auditory’. There were options for different dialog types, so he set ‘kill dialog tone’ to ‘dingaling’, ‘level dialog tone’ to ‘fanfare’, and ‘training dialog tone’ to ‘alarm’. He didn't mind having a built-in alarm clock, but a familiar ringing was infinitely preferable to a blinding neon sign lasering its way straight through his eyelids. There were no other notification types listed at the moment, but there was an option for default notification sound, which he left on the preset of ‘alert’.

He had decided on audio alerts upon seeing the ‘notification log’ option, which had caused a mid-sized panel to appear on his HUD showing a list of all his previous messages. Once he finished customizing the alert tones, he dragged the log window to the bottom left of his view and made it mostly transparent. He looked around the room, the log staying fixed with the position of his head, not his

eyes. *Damn, it is still pretty distracting. I wish there was a way to toggle this thing on and off... hey, wasn't there a menu called keywords or something? **Options.***

After tapping the 'keywords' option for the mental interface layer, Rain was presented with a new menu with a list of options on the left and something that looked like a text editor on the right. The list on the left was familiar, listing out the names of the various menus that he could open, as well as the names of his spells. There was a new keyword at the bottom of the list that he didn't recognize: 'notification log'. Selecting it, he saw that it populated the text field with the same phrase.

*Humm, **Notification Log.***

As he concentrated on the command, the log disappeared. Concentrating again, he turned it back on the same way.

Ok, good. I can turn it on and off. I wonder if I can change the keyword?

Touching the text field caused a line of text to appear at the bottom of the window. 'Select new keyword', it said. Not having a keyboard, Rain tried focusing on the word 'log' and the text in the field changed to match. *Nice.* He thought, clicking apply and closing the menu with a swipe.

Log.

The log disappeared.

Log.

The log reappeared.

Cool. Oh, wait, gotta test something.

Ahem. I wrote in my log that I was going to the forest to find a log.

Nothing happened.

Good, it only shows up when I actually mean to use the keyword, not whenever I think the word in some other context. What even is the point of the verbal interface then? I've heard others speaking to cast spells, but why would you do that instead of just using a thought?

Rain turned his attention back to the log floating in his lower field of vision.

Now is there a way to see the full text for these? It isn't showing the details, just a summary line.

Opening back up his options menu he found that indeed there was. 'Expand on focus' turned out to be the single most revolutionary setting Rain had discovered so far, except perhaps the HUD itself. With it enabled, focusing on an entry in the log for a few seconds brought up the full message. Dismissing it was as easy as returning his focus to his surroundings. On a hunch, he tried it with his health bar, seeing the numbers 200/200 appearing in white text when he focused on it, then fading away as he stopped.

What the hell is the deal with these menus anyway? The fact that they are here at all is bad enough, but sometimes it seems like the options I need are just appearing right when I need them. It is almost like... It is almost like I am seeing what I expect to see. Does my mind define the interface? Does it look like a video game because I wanted to be a game developer before I had to drop out of college? Arrrg! Questioning my reality is so annoying! I should have paid more attention in my philosophy elective...

Rain closed everything out and stood, deciding that he had already spent more than enough time screwing around. His mana was still regenerating, having not quite reached full even after sleeping the whole night. To speed it up, he activated winter and then pulled up his skills menu to see the changes to purify from the rank up. The mana cost had doubled from 10mp/min to 20mp/min and the range had increased to two-meters. There was no indication that it had gotten any stronger. He suspected that it would have based upon how much faster Ameliah's aura was than his, but he didn't have a convenient mess to test it on.

Mana regen is still too damn slow. I have a skill point, but there aren't any auras I want to unlock right now; I have enough mana issues as it is. I wonder if there is anything in any of the other mage trees? Bah, almost made it out of the bunk room without getting lost down another rabbit hole.

Sitting back down on the bed, Rain started tabbing through the myriad options in his skills menu. He was just hunting for likely skill names and not bothering to read the descriptions. He almost flicked right past it, going two screens further before realizing what he had seen and flipping back.

The name of the tree was one he had seen before: 'magical utility'. The rank zero skill 'intrinsic clarity' jumped out at him as exactly what he was looking for. It increased mana regeneration by a flat 20% at no cost. Rain immediately selected it and spent his skill point. *Damn it! I saw this before but forgot about it. This is better than winter! Well, actually I suppose winter isn't really about the caster's mana regeneration, being an AOE aura and all... Still, this is exactly what I was looking for.*

Rain pulled up his status and skills to check how much of a difference the skill had made.

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 4

Experience: 331/700

Unclassed

| | |
|---------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |

| | |
|-----------|----|
| Strength | 10 |
| Recovery | 10 |
| Endurance | 10 |
| Vigor | 10 |
| Focus | 10 |
| Clarity | 60 |

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Free Points | 0 |
|-------------|---|

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|---------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 32/hr | 30/hr | -1/hr 10% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| | | | |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Skills

Refrigerate (2/10) Exp: 83/200

15-17 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 2 meters

Cost: 10 mp/s

Extend Aura (1/10) Exp: 45/100

Extend aura range by 1 meter

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Purify (2/10) Exp: 34/200

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 2 meters

Cost: 20 mp/min

Winter (1/10) Exp: 11/100

Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (1/10) Exp: 0/100

Multiply base mana regeneration by 120%

Free Skill Points: 0

Satisfied at the improvement in his skills and finally ready to get on his way, Rain strapped on his boots, grabbed his things, and headed out to the quest hall to see if there was anything appropriate for his level today.

When he reached the board, he saw that there was actually something posted on the very bottom row. It had a 10 Tel reward, which had him excited, but he couldn't determine much else from the posting. The icon was a pair of clasped hands.

Bringing it over to Gus, he handed it to him and waited hopefully. Gus looked at the paper, then at Rain, seeming to consider. Eventually, he shrugged and motioned for Rain to follow. He led Rain to a room with a table like the one he had been brought to on his first day. Gus told him to wait there and left.

After about 5 minutes of waiting, Rain started getting bored and pulled out his language notes. Another fifteen minutes or so passed and Rain was starting to wonder if Gus had forgotten about him when he saw his head poke in the room. Seeing that Rain was still there, he came in, three people following him. Two women and a man took seats at the table, Rain hurriedly tucking away his notes and the ration bar he had been using to strengthen his jaw.

Gus's head was turned towards the others and he was saying something to them. Rain caught his name and the word 'slime' in there, so he guessed Gus was telling them a bit about his exploits. The lead

woman looked a bit unimpressed, but her two younger colleagues were just looking at him respectfully. All three were wearing thick clothing and high boots and the young man in the back was carrying three shovels. They clearly weren't adventurers, just normal workers it seemed.

Eventually, Gus turned to Rain and attempted to explain what the quest entailed. After another five minutes of discussion, Rain finally reached the understanding that it was a sort of escort quest. These three needed to do something down in the sewer and Rain was to protect them. Nodding, he said, "Yes, I protect. Kill slime."

Well, at least it is something I know I can kill. I just wish I could do something... else. I might as well just start sleeping in the sewers like some sort of troll if this keeps up.

Gus nodded, handing him the quest slip and stood to leave the room.

"Wait," said the senior worker. Rain looked at her questioningly. "How <something> kill slimes?" she asked, Rain guessing at her meaning. *That is a reasonable question I guess. If I was hiring someone to protect me, I'd want to know that they were up to the task.*

Rain stood, eyeing the room. Seeing that there was enough space, he stood and motioned for the others to stay seated. He walked over to the side of the room furthest away from them, turned, and activated refrigeration without extending the range. The sudden blast of cold caused a wave of cold air to wash over Gus and the workers, but the ring of frost condensing from the moisture in the air stopped short of them at the two-meter radius of the skill.

The two younger workers seemed startled at this. The senior worker and Gus took it more in stride, though Gus did look at him a bit curiously. *Maybe he doesn't recognize the skill? Auras probably aren't that popular. The mana cost on refrigerate is crushing.* Deactivating the aura, Rain walked back over to the group. The woman nodded to Gus, who turned to Rain and handed him the quest slip before leaving the room.

Turning to the senior worker, Rain pointed at himself. "Rain."

"Vanna," the senior worker replied. Then, pointing at the two younger workers she identified the woman as Yott and the young man with the shovels as Tarny. She then motioned at him to follow and led the way from the room and out of the guild. She took them to the sewer entrance and started descending without waiting to see if the others were following. When she reached the bottom, she instructed Yott to light a torch. While Yott extracted a torch from her pack and lit it, Rain looked around. He was pleased to see that the area still looked pretty clean from his last purification. The stone was wet, but no longer stained.

In short order they set off upstream, Rain leading and watching for slimes as the others followed. Vanna directed him down a side passage he had seen yesterday but not investigated. There was a smaller channel cut in the center of this passage feeding into the main waterway, but it was dry. The day before he had just jumped over it to continue down the main tunnel as this one didn't have any torches in it. He thought he remembered that there had been a trickle of water flowing in the channel the day before, but now the stone wasn't even damp.

They traveled up the sloping passage for a little while before Rain heard the telltale sound of slimes approaching. Holding up a hand, he motioned for the others to stay back. He moved forward, seeing the

forms of two slimes as they entered the torchlight. Looking back he confirmed that nobody had followed him. Satisfied that he wouldn't inadvertently hurt his allies with his aura, he moved in to engage the slimes.

He activated refrigeration and waded in, freezing and killing the slimes without any trouble and learning what a 'dingaling' was as the bright tone chimed to announce the death of the monsters. Vanna seemed to be reassured at this, and the others looked excited, chattering to each other and beaming.

First time seeing an adventurer in action?

Rain switched to purify and started cleaning away the decaying slimes to look for Tel. He thought the white aura was a little bit stronger at rank two, shining brighter and removing the slime a bit faster. As pleased as he was with this, it was nothing compared to the reaction of the workers. The discovery that he could evaporate slime and leave the stone spotless had made them unreasonably excited, even the more experienced Vanna giving him an awed look.

Rain's mood was further boosted when he saw that both of the slimes had left a Tel behind as the goo evaporated. He collected them, adding them to his vial and then deactivating his aura. Checking his mana bar, he saw that he was at around half full, and thus good to continue. He motioned to the workers to follow and continued up the tunnel.

Eventually, the passageway ended and Rain saw why the shovels would be needed. There was a large backup of gunk blocking the channel as it passed under a wall. There was another pile over to the side of the tunnel, suggesting that it had been dug out before and since become blocked again. Yott stuck her torch into a sconce and Tarny passed out the shovels. They made to start working, but Rain held up a hand to stop them.

I want to try something...

Walking to the blockage, he activated purify at full range to catch all of it. He watched in satisfaction as the gunk started to evaporate and disappear into the air. The pace was slow though, and the blockage was pretty big. *I'll run out of mana before I even make a dent in that. Damn. Oh well. I'll help them clean up after they clear it.* He motioned to the others, canceling his aura.

"Sorry, mana," he said, getting out of their way so they could work. He walked over to where the torch was mounted in the wall and purified himself a place to sit down and rest. The workers looked a little disappointed but set about clearing the blockage without complaint. By the time they had cleared most of it, Rain's mana was significantly recovered.

Yott broke through the block with a thrust of her shovel, and Rain looked up as she yelped at the tide of slimy water that gushed through the gap. Vanna reacted quickly, jumping clear of the channel. The others weren't fast enough, getting drenched as the pressure behind the barrier punched through and the slurry of sludge and water started washing them down the channel.

Quickly, Rain jumped to his feet and grabbed for Yott's arm, catching her hand and hauling on it as hard as he could to help her out of the channel. Thankfully, it wasn't more than waist deep and he was able to get her up over the edge, though not before she was covered from head to toe.

Tarny wasn't as lucky, getting washed down the tunnel by the tide of filth. Vanna sprinted after him, catching up as he managed to wedge himself in the channel. Before he lost his grip, she hauled him out and laid him panting on the side of the channel. The three of them watched as the torrent of dirty water continued unabated.

Rain wasted no time activating purification. He had personally experienced being covered head to toe in sludge and wouldn't wish the experience on his worst enemy. The watery slurry seemed to be less resistant to the purification than the solid blockage had been, and within a few minutes, only the memory of the filth remained.

The workers thanked him profusely, Tarny even going so far as to give Rain an awkwardly enthusiastic hug. Once everyone had calmed down, they started walking back down the tunnel and by the time they reached the main waterway the flow had decreased to a slow, steady stream. There were no further incidents and Rain's mana was back to full again by the time the party returned to the guild. The three workers followed Rain to the counter. Gus wasn't there, but Vanna took care of relating the tale, the guild attendant marking down some notes in the ledger before handing Rain his ten Tel.

The workers thanked Rain again and left, leaving him with a free afternoon. He walked over to the board. There were no more quests suitable for his level, so he found himself at a loss for what to do.

I guess I'll train. Good on money for the moment, though I could use a drink and a meal. Oh, I should buy a waterskin or something. Sewer water everywhere, but not a drop to drink.

Rain wandered over to the tavern, splurging a bit and buying half a roast chicken and a flagon of beer to wash it down. This cost him a whole Tel, seeming to be the going rate for a meal at the establishment. It wasn't like he could read the menu, so he was somewhat at the mercy of the staff as to what he got.

The chicken was delicious and he could see himself spending all of his money here if he wasn't careful. He also purchased another four ration bars and tucked them away in his pack, promising himself that he would use them up before paying for another proper meal. All said and done, he was feeling quite rich with 10 Tel and four copper in his pocket.

Training time. Humm, can't exactly train refrigerate in here, so purify it is.

He activated the aura, extending it and leaving it on as he walked over to the bar to return his plate. This caused a little bit of a stir in the room, but the commotion died down as it became clear that he wasn't about to set the building on fire.

Man, I don't even want to think about the immolate aura. If it is anything like refrigerate, I could accidentally burn down the whole city. Maybe that is why people outside the guild reacted so strongly when I used this?

Rain's mana ticked down steadily. He kept an eye on it as he left the room, scrubbing his way down the hallway as he headed for the bathroom. He was halfway there when he stopped suddenly.

I... don't have to go anymore. I had to go before I left the tavern, and now I... don't. Don't tell me purify works on....

Rain stood in the hallway, stunned as his mind struggled to process his latest revelation.

Best. Spell. Ever.

12: Class

Rain woke to the pleasant sound of his alarm. Pleasant in comparison to having his eyes melted from his skull, that is. Rolling out of bed, he immediately activated purify to clean his teeth and empty his bladder. *This is so fucking awesome.*

He had gone shopping in the afternoon the day before, securing a few essential items such as a belt, a waterskin, a flint and steel, a second-hand knife, and a coil of rope. The knife was in its sheath at his hip, the crude spear discarded now that it was no longer needed. Rain fully intended to rely on his refrigeration aura to fight now that the range was sufficient, the knife being more for utility than combat. It was a good backup, though Rain wasn't sure it would be much use against anything that his aura couldn't handle.

Today he was testing a theory. Pulling on his boots and grabbing his now slightly heavier pack, he rushed from the room. When he reached the quest hall, he went straight to the board. To his satisfaction, there was a selection of low-level quests available.

Thought so. They put them up overnight, and all the good ones go first thing. I've been spending too long lazing about in bed.

A quest in the bottom row with the sword icon and a picture of a tailless beaver-looking thing caught his eye. Snagging it, Rain brought it over to Gus. The portly man looked wide awake despite the early hour. Rain somehow wasn't the first to the counter and he had to wait, but soon enough he reached Gus and handed him the paper. Taking it, Gus nodded, then marked his plate number down in the ledger and grabbed a piece of paper. Consulting the ledger, he sketched Rain a crude map. The city was simply a circle with the guild marked near the east end. The river was shown, and Gus proceeded to draw an arrow from the guild out towards the river, following it upstream. He then drew a patch of trees and circled them, tapping the map with a finger.

Handing him the paper, Gus attempted to clarify, working laboriously around Rain's limited vocabulary. Rain gathered that the creature, called a 'Skiffun', was damaging some trees outside of the city. It had been spotted by someone and reported to the guild. The bounty was 20 Tel, and the creature was level three or four. Rain jotted down some notes in his nice new leather-bound notebook, recording new words and their phonetic pronunciation moreso than details about the quest.

Satisfied that he knew what to do, Rain thanked Gus and retreated across the room towards a bench. He winced when he noticed the line that built up behind him at Gus's counter. It had taken quite a while to get the details of the quest right, Gus starting to look a bit annoyed towards the end. The adventurers waiting in line at the counter gave him dirty looks but didn't hassle him as he passed.

Quest secured, Rain pulled up his notifications to review yesterday's progress now that he wasn't in a rush.

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Stamina Use: 30

Mana Use: 175

Skill Experience Earned

Refrigerate: 21

Extend Aura: 15

Purify: 130

Winter: 9

Intrinsic Clarity: 175 [Rank Up]

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 4

Experience: 536/700

Unclassed

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |
| | |
| Strength | 10 |
| Recovery | 10 |
| Endurance | 10 |
| Vigor | 10 |
| Focus | 10 |
| Clarity | 60 |
| | |
| Free Points | 0 |

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|---------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |

| | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|-------------|
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 37.5/hr | 35/hr | -1/hr 10% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
|--------|--------|--------|----------|
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Skills

Refrigerate (2/10) Exp: 104/200

15-17 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 2 meters

Cost: 10 mp/s

Extend Aura (1/10) Exp: 60/100

Extend aura range by 1 meter

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Purify (2/10) Exp: 164/200

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 2 meters

Cost: 20 mp/min

Winter (1/10) Exp: 20/100

Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (2/10) Exp: 75/200

Multiply base mana regeneration by 140%

Free Skill Points: 0

Nice! Ranked up in clarity and it now gives another 20% regeneration. Looks like it got a ton of experience without me doing anything special. Must be passive based on mana regeneration or something. The more mana I use, the faster it will level! I knew I was right about this build!

Selecting winter and maximizing the range, Rain set out, seeing no reason to wait around in the guild. He would eat on the road once he made it out of the city. He wasn't sure how long he would have to hike to reach the copse of trees, so he decided to start early.

The city was just starting to wake up as he exited the gates, passing by a pair of armored guards with bronze plates stamped with the shield emblem. His guess was that they belonged to some sort of guard or militia and that the plates marked rank, just like they did for the adventurer's guild. Idly, Rain wondered if there were other guilds too, such as a wizard's guild or a thief's guild. *The thieves in the city probably don't use bronze plates to identify themselves. That would be pretty stupid.*

The walk to the grove was pleasant in the crisp morning air. Much better than traipsing through the sewers. Rain occasionally activated purify to use up a bit of mana and level his skills, but he was careful to keep plenty left in his tank should anything jump out and attack him. The area was patrolled, so he felt safe enough, but there was no harm in a little caution.

The river road was largely deserted, but he did see an occasional traveler other than the infrequent mounted patrols. There weren't any farms out here; instead, the road seemed to be leading into some hills. However, before he reached the hills proper, he spotted the grove off to one side of the road. It was not a full forest by any means, but it was big enough to get lost in. He left the road and headed for it cautiously.

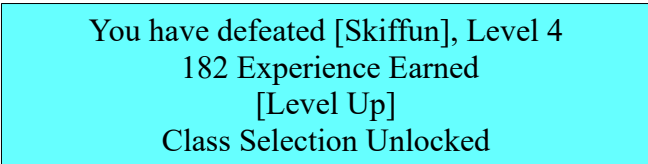
The hunt for the Skiffun was less pleasant than the walk along the river. Rain spent the rest of the morning and a good part of the afternoon hunting through the trees looking for the beast. It wasn't a large patch of woodland, but it wasn't small either, and the underbrush was quite thick. Eventually, he found a tree that looked like it had been gnawed down to the stump. There was another similar tree off in the distance, and he proceeded to follow the trail of damage to the den of the beast.

The fight with the overgrown rodent was.... anticlimactic. The beast was about twice the size of a normal beaver, but it was slow, and it hadn't been able to get anywhere near Rain as he froze it with his refrigeration aura at maximum range. It took nearly all of his mana, but he managed to kill it without it even touching him. He almost felt bad, but the way the creature had immediately leaped to attack him with its gigantic teeth had settled his moral issue, turning it into kill-or-be-killed.

He delayed checking his kill notification until after he finished making a horrible mess of skinning and cleaning the Skiffun. He had only tried because he was hungry and thought the pelt might have been worth something. He also built a small fire and skewered a slab of meat over it to roast, hoping that his stomach would have recovered enough by the time it was done. Removing the Skiffun's intestines had been particularly upsetting.

I still feel kind of bad for killing the little guy, but I can at least make it so the meat doesn't go to waste.

Sitting back to let his meal cook, Rain pulled up his notification log to see how much experience the fight had gotten him.



You have defeated [Skiffun], Level 4
182 Experience Earned
[Level Up]
Class Selection Unlocked

The level up was expected, but the line about class selection was a bit of a surprise.

I guess I'm about to learn what that whole 'unclassed' thing on my attributes page was all about.

Opening his attributes panel with anticipation, Rain saw that there was a (+) next to his 'Unclassed' status. Pressing it, he was greeted with a new panel.

Select a Class

Worker (+)

Common

Requirement: None

Effect: 50% boost to non-combat skills

Warning: Experience may no longer be gained through combat

Warrior

Common

Locked

Requirement: Strength greater than endurance and focus

Requirement: 10 kills with physical skills

Effect: 50% boost to the effects of the strength attribute

Mage

Common

Locked

Requirement: Focus greater than strength and endurance

Requirement: 10 kills with magical skills

Effect: 50% boost to the effects of the focus attribute

Defender

Common

Locked

Requirement: Endurance greater than strength and focus

Requirement: Absorb 1000 total points of damage

Effect: 50% boost to the effects of the endurance attribute

Jack

Uncommon

Hidden Class, Revealed by Meeting Primary Requirement

Requirement: Strength, endurance, and focus equal

Requirement: 5 kills with physical skills

Requirement: 5 kills with magical skills

Requirement: Absorb 500 total points of damage

Effect: 40% boost to the effects of the strength, endurance, and focus attributes

Dynamo (+)

Rare

Hidden Class, Revealed by Meeting Requirement

Requirement: Clarity at least 5 times greater than focus

Requirement: Recover at least 1000 total points of mana

Requirement: 2 skills at level 2 or greater

Effect: 200% boost to the effect of the clarity attribute

Warning: Rare classes have higher experience requirements for progression

After taking his time reading through the panel, Rain felt like the choice was obvious.

Jack gives a 40% boost to three attributes, so a total of 120%. That is a straight upgrade over warrior, mage, and defender. Dynamo wins hands down with the massive 200% boost to clarity, which is the stat that I actually have. What the heck does a 'higher experience requirement' mean? How much higher? Still, with the boost to clarity, I should get a ton more experience to make up for it.

Rain only debated for few more seconds, then grinned and selected Dynamo.

Ha, as if I'd pick worker. I could try to meet the other requirements for Jack, but...no.

The menu disappeared, leaving Rain back at his status screen. He invested his 10 free points in clarity but didn't apply them yet, pausing to review the changes.

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 5

Experience: 14/2022

Dynamo

| | |
|---------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |

| | |
|-----------|----|
| Strength | 10 |
| Recovery | 10 |
| Endurance | 10 |
| Vigor | 10 |
| Focus | 10 |
| Clarity | 70 |

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Free Points | 0 |
|-------------|---|

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|---------|---------|---------|----------|
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |

| | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|-------------|
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 134/hr | 123/hr | -1/hr 10% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
|--------|--------|--------|----------|
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Now we are talking! I can recover to full in around an hour and a half, up from two days when I started! I still can't leave my attack aura on 24-7. Nowhere close. Should I really try for that? I'm starting to get a bit concerned at my low health pool. A few points in strength could go a long way... No, not yet. I'll just have to be extra careful. More mana regen means I can use my skills more, which means they will level faster. I'll stick it out to 100 clarity at least.

His plan set, Rain applied his points and then pulled up his skills to consider what to do with his skill point.

If I want to level up winter, I need to be able to pump more mana into it. Extend helps, I think. I wonder if I can use amplify at the same time? Do they add, or multiply? Either way, looks like something I'd want eventually, so I might as well take it. There, done.

Skills

Refrigerate (2/10) Exp: 104/200

15-17 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 2 meters

Cost: 10 mp/s

Extend Aura (1/10) Exp: 60/100

Extend aura range by 1 meter

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Purify (2/10) Exp: 164/200

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 2 meters

Cost: 20 mp/min

Winter (1/10) Exp: 20/100

Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (2/10) Exp: 75/200

Multiply base mana regeneration by 140%

Amplify Aura (1/10) Exp: 0/100

Multiply aura intensity by 110%

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Free Skill Points: 0

Rain closed out the menu. Already running winter in the background, he focused on the skill, trying to amplify the effect. It took him a minute, but he soon figured out how to apply the effects of amplify and extend at the same time. It wasn't as simple as just pumping more mana into the spell. By focusing on what he wanted, power or range, he could select one or both to activate. It was an unfamiliar sensation, but he knew it would become second nature in time. Winter was already starting to feel that way, with him needing less and less attention to maintain it. He played around with the skill a bit more, pulling open his statistics panel to check the numbers.

Up to 135/hr with amplify alone. Doesn't help much. Yet. And the cost multiplies, so it uses 1.44 per hour with both amplify and extend active.

Deciding to take his new resolution to be careful to heart, Rain closed out of all of his menus and kept watch over the edge of his campsite while he waited for the meat to cook. He didn't think it was likely that something big like the musk wolf would be around, not with him being in range of the city's patrols. Nonetheless, he kept a careful watch as he rested.

He wanted to test out amplify on his other auras but forced himself to wait as his mana regenerated. After a while, the meat over the fire was starting to burn, so he took it off and eyed it skeptically. Figuring that overcooked was better than undercooked, he took a hesitant bite. As the meat met his tongue he immediately choked and spluttered at the aggressively pungent flavor that assailed his taste buds. He ejected the meat from his mouth in a spray of saliva and dove for his waterskin.

Gah! What the shit?! It tastes worse than a slime! How is that fucking possible?

Belatedly, Rain remembered his purification aura could deal with this sort of thing, so he activated it, using amplify to quicken the effect slightly. The oily taste in his mouth seemed resistant to the aura, but it did begin to fade. Rain canceled the aura after around a minute once all trace of the flavor had been scoured from his mouth.

No eating monsters. Anton was right; Hegar was an idiot for trying to cook that musk wolf. Blech, that was awful.

Rain angrily kicked the fallen piece of meat into the fire and started packing up. He scraped at the tattered Skiffun hide with his knife to remove the last bits of flesh. He then blasted it with purify for a couple minutes, leaving it looking clean, if a bit ragged from his amateur attempt at skinning.

I'm never doing that again, not even if this dang fur is worth 10 Tel. I'm not a fan of fur coats, even if they are made from murder beavers. It might be a different world, but I am sure as hell not going to start clubbing baby seals.

Once it was clean enough, Rain tucked the fur into his pack, then turned to the fire. He tried an amplified refrigerate, but the ring of frost didn't even make it all the way to the flames before losing to the heat. He canceled it once he saw that it wasn't working and that his mana was starting to drop too low for his comfort. He kicked dirt onto the flames instead until they went out, then started pushing back through the brush towards the road.

He slowly made his way back to the city, draining his mana by alternating purify and refrigerate when it got close to full. He was being careful not to use his skills while there were other travelers in sight and also making sure not to let his mana drop below a quarter. Reaching the city as the sun was starting to go down, he approached the guards at the gate. With the armor masking their faces, he couldn't tell if it was the same pair that had been there when he left. They waved him through when he showed his adventurer's plate though they didn't seem happy about it for some reason.

Rain dragged his aching feet to the guild to turn in his quest. Gus wasn't there, so he instead went to a line staffed by the old man who had guided him to the bunk-room on his very first night in the guild. The quest was accepted and he was paid his 20 Tel, but he had needed to show the man the fur as proof that he had killed the beast. The guild refused to buy the pelt, but Rain was happy that it hadn't been totally worthless to bring along.

Feeling rich, Rain made his way to the tavern for meat and mead. Now safe in the guild, he was a bit freer with his mana, blasting passers-by with full-powered purification. This was met with mild alarm followed by confusion, the effect of the aura being pretty subtle if you weren't covered in excrement. Still, Rain felt no need to experience the scent of medieval hygiene if he didn't have to.

He enjoyed his supper, then spent the evening in the tavern, trying to hold a conversation with the group that had gathered around him once they caught on to the effect of his white aura. *Looks like I'm pretty popular*, Rain thought, looking at the clean faces of his admirers. *Nah, they just love me for my aura.*

Eventually, everyone in the tavern had gotten a good cleaning as well as several of the tables and a good section of the floor. Rain had learned a bunch of new words, taking copious notes in his notebook with the adventurers even filling in the written forms of a few things for him. By the time Khurt came over to kick everyone out or get them to cough up for the bunk room, Rain was dead tired. He paid his two Tel and decided to call it a night, relieved at his much improved financial situation.

13: Party

Rain was lying on his bunk reviewing his messages. He had woken to his alarm and walked around the room blasting everyone with purify to drain his mana down to zero before switching to amplified winter. He didn't plan on rushing for a quest today, so he had returned to his bunk to sort through the pile of experience he had gotten from the massive amount of mana he had used the day before.

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Stamina Use: 50

Mana Use: 520

Skill Experience Earned

Refrigerate: 200 [Rank Up]

Extend Aura: 32

Purify: 250 [Rank Up]

Winter: 11

Amplify Aura: 27

Intrinsic Clarity: 520 [Rank Up]

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 5

Experience: 589/2022

Dynamo

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |
| | |
| Strength | 10 |
| Recovery | 10 |
| Endurance | 10 |
| Vigor | 10 |
| Focus | 10 |
| Clarity | 70 |
| | |
| Free Points | 0 |

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|---------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 154/hr | 140/hr | -1.2/hr 11% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| | | | |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Skills

Refrigerate (3/10) Exp: 104/400

22-25 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 15 mp/s

Extend Aura (1/10) Exp: 92/100

Extend aura range by 1 meter

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Purify (3/10) Exp: 214/400

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 30 mp/min

Winter (1/10) Exp: 31/100

Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (3/10) Exp: 395/400

Multiply base mana regeneration by 160%

Amplify Aura (1/10) Exp: 27/100

Multiply aura intensity by 110%

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

Free Skill Points: 0

Dynamo is so awesome. I'm going to max out intrinsic clarity really fast at this rate. And that will just let me burn mana even faster. I don't think the higher class experience thing is going to be an issue.

Right, so priorities. Food, money, not dying, all set for now. What... do I want? Power? Fame? To go home?

At the thought of home, Rain felt a hollow sort of ache for his own world. He had no family or close friends, but it was still home. *I wonder if anyone will even notice I'm gone... yeah, ok, my boss definitely will. He gets on my case if I am late to the site by five minutes. Other than that though...*

Rain sat quietly as his mana regenerated, thinking.

I was...lonely. I was surrounded by people, lost in a sea of them, but how many close conversations have I had in the past year? I was just...existing. Here, here I feel alive.

Looking down at his feet, Rain let himself just drift for a while, lost in the past and uncertain about the future. He sat up, swinging his feet over the side of the bunk.

I... I'm not going home. This world... this is my home now. This is a fresh start. I'm tired of being alone. Tired of being weak and poor. I'll make my own way, reach out for what I want and work to get it, but I don't have to do it alone. I need to learn this language and to do that, I need to be around people. I'm going to spend some time in the guild today, or maybe I'll walk the city. If I can find a party to go on a quest with that would be ideal.

Course set, Rain pulled on his boots and made his way out of the bunkroom and into the noise of the quest hall. He didn't go to the board; instead, he wandered through the room to watch various groups of adventurers talking and laughing with each other.

Most groups were between three and five people, usually with at least one warrior type and one mage; however, there was a large variation even within the simple archetypes. Some warriors had swords, but there were others with different weapons such as pikes, axes, and hammers. There was even one individual who had made the questionable decision to dual-wield shields.

Solo adventurers were rare. The few that he saw quickly joined up with larger groups. Not all of the adventurers seemed to stay at the guild, many coming in from the front door instead of from the bunkroom. He only saw one other person clearly not in a group: the scarred man he had noticed before. He was hesitant to approach him though. Anyone with that many scars probably wasn't safe to be

around, not because they would be sketchy or anything, but just because it showed a certain lack of an instinct for self-preservation.

Rain picked out the closest person that he had spoken to before and made his way over, intending to ask him about the etiquette of joining an adventuring group. Said person was the mage who had first noticed and taken advantage of his purification aura a few days ago. Rain had picked him out of the crowd by his height and brilliant orange robe, complete with pointy orange wizard hat. Greeting him, Rain had barely started trying to frame his question when he was interrupted by the arrival of two women.

Both were clearly adventurers. One was older, with steel-gray hair and a very serious expression on her face. The younger woman was closer to Rain's own age, with long brown hair and a cute, up-turned nose. She was wearing a dark blue robe banded with white around the sleeves in contrast to the practical outfit of the older woman, whose clothing was similar to Rain's own shirt and trousers, except in black. The younger woman was a mage. The staff was a pretty good clue, being the wizardly variety, not the kung-fu master type. Neither the older woman nor the man in the orange robe had a visible weapon.

The older woman had interrupted Rain when she arrived, placing a hand on the orange mage's shoulder and giving him an impatient look. She motioned to the door, speaking to the man while simultaneously grabbing the collar of the other woman's robe. The younger woman had been trying to wander off into the crowd, but the older one was having none of it.

The man in the orange robe turned to Rain. He apologized to him, trying to explain that he had to go.

Might as well try.

“Quest?” he asked hurriedly before the man could get away. “Level? Danger? I come?”

“No.”

This was the older woman, not even looking at Rain as she dismissed him out of hand. Turning to the door, she started hauling the younger woman with her, heedless of her attempts to escape.

The orange mage glanced after her, then looked back to Rain, seeming torn. “Wait,” he said to Rain, then hurried after the woman, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder. He leaned in to whisper into her ear, then the two had a quick conversation, glancing over at Rain from time to time. Eventually, the woman sighed and nodded, then went off to retrieve the woman in blue, who had escaped at some point during the conversation.

The man in orange beckoned Rain over. As he approached, the man held out a hand to stop him, then asked a question, raising one bushy eyebrow. He must have been able to read the incomprehension on Rain's face as he tried again, speaking slower, and using fewer words.

It took him a while to get what the man was trying to explain, but luckily the two women took a few minutes to re-appear and he had time to piece it together.

They are going on a quest, and I can come and help, but I don't get a share of the reward, whatever that may be. I can live with that. This guy seems pretty cool, and learning about how to be an adventurer is probably more important than money.

Rain noticed the young woman returning from the direction of the tavern carrying a loaf of bread and half a chicken. The older woman was rapidly approaching in her wake, so Rain quickly nodded, accepting the man's terms.

The man beckoned, then started walking to the door. Rain followed, falling into formation with the two women. The older one ignored him, but the younger one greeted him cheerily with a wave, her mouth full of bread.

She's pretty cute.

Upon leaving the guild, they stopped by a man sitting on the steps who rose to greet them, giving Rain an appraising look. Rain looked right back at him, noting the full plate armor and two shields propped against the wall near where he had been sitting. *Really? This guy is with them? What did I sign myself up for?*

The mage in orange spoke to the man briefly. Apparently satisfied with the explanation, the armored man nodded and extended a hand for Rain to shake.

“Carten,” he said, crushing Rain's fingers in his gauntleted hand.

“Rain,” Rain replied, trying not to wince at the deathgrip. Thankfully Carten released his hand without damaging it. The man in orange then introduced himself as Jamus and pointed at the two women, identifying them as Lavarro and Mahria.

The five of them set off, the older woman, Lavarro, leading the way. As they walked through the city, Jamus attempted to explain the mission, but finding that Rain lacked many of the needed words, this slowly transitioned into an impromptu language lesson.

Lavarro ignored this and led them to a stable just inside the gates where a largish cart was waiting for them. She spoke to the stablehands, who brought out a brown horse and attached it to the cart with a harness. Being from the city, Rain had very little familiarity with horses, so he did his best to stay out of the way.

The cart itself was empty as they rolled out of the city gates, heading north up the river road. Mahria quickly claimed a spot in the back, joined by Jamus, and then Rain, who clambered up with some difficulty. Lavarro was walking in front holding the horse's lead and Carten was bringing up the rear, seemingly unencumbered by his full plate armor and thick metal shields.

As the cart bounced and jostled down the road, Jamus continued instructing Rain, giving him words and having him repeat them back. He was a good teacher, clear in his explanations and patient with Rain's mistakes. He was also a skilled artist, which aided matters greatly. Rain found his notebook filling up with hundreds of new words and images labeled with phonetic pronunciations and spellings in the glyphs of the common tongue.

After a few hours of this, Mahria butted her nose in, poking Rain and starting to interrogate him. Jamus waved her off, but she was persistent. Rain, not minding her curiosity, attempted to explain why he didn't speak common. He told her that he had woken up in a forest, far from his homeland and with no idea how he had gotten there. He refrained from mentioning that he had come from a completely different world, just shrugging when she had asked him how far was 'far'. He was also cagey on the technical details of his home, hiding behind the language barrier somewhat deliberately.

Rain didn't have a hard reason for not telling her the truth. Part of it was a desire to fit in, which was much easier if you were just from 'very far' instead of 'another dimension'. The fact that his home was far enough away that he didn't know any of the local countries or geography was entirely true, and Mahria and Jamus seemed to accept it.

The other part of his evasiveness was, well, paranoia. He didn't know how he got here, and that meant a person might have brought him to this world, not some natural phenomenon. If they had, they probably had some sort of reason, and Rain wasn't keen to find out what that reason might be. Blabbing about it with people he just met seemed like a bad idea.

Rain also got his fair share of questions in, though it took quite a while to parse out the answers due to the language barrier. The name of the city that they had left was Fel Sadanis, and it had been independent for the last hundred years or so. Law was kept in the city by the Vigilant Order of Watch Keepers, or simply the Watch, which was a multinational organization dedicated to protecting the people from themselves. The guards and scouts he had seen in the city wearing the shield emblem on their plates belonged to the Watch, which had a much more military structure than the chaotic adventurer's guild.

From Mahria's expression as Jamus explained the Watch to Rain, it was clear that she didn't care for them too much. Jamus seemed indifferent, just giving Rain a few quick pointers about them so he could stay out of trouble.

Entry into the city required a plate from a recognized guild or a special residential pass. There was no offensive magic allowed in the city. The Watch grudgingly tolerated the presence of the adventurer's guild hall, trusting them to police themselves within the confines of the building. Beyond that, though, if you were caught using dangerous magic in the city, you could be fined or thrown in jail. Mahria explained to Rain that the Watch's definition of 'dangerous magic' included anything that they didn't understand. From her tone and body language, Rain was sure that she had gotten arrested by them before, but he decided against asking if it had been justified.

Rain's mana had reached full, so he decided to drain it out with purification. He warned the others so as to not startle them, then concentrated, calling up his aura with both amplify and extend. Jamus smiled appreciatively, but Mahria just looked confused as the white light washed over her. Jamus explained the effect of the aura to her pointing out how the dirt ground into the old boards of the cart was slowly disappearing.

This skill really makes no damn sense. It works fine on dirt, so could I use it to dig a hole? It didn't seem to affect the ground when Ameliah used it in the forest, just the slime gunk. Maybe it works on the dirt in the cart because it isn't supposed to be there?

Rain reined in his thoughts and brought his attention back to his companions. Mahria was watching the effect of the aura closely now, her face a wonder of disbelief. Catching on to what was happening,

Carten had wandered closer to the cart and into the range of Rain's aura. Lavarro either hadn't noticed or didn't care to investigate whatever it was that Rain was doing.

At level three and with both modifiers applied, Rain couldn't hold the aura for more than five minutes. Still, by the time he had to drop it, the cart and its occupants were practically spotless. Carten was laughing uproariously at the sight of the horse. It was only three-quarters clean, its head and fore-legs dusty from the road, but the rest looking immaculate and freshly brushed. The aura hadn't reached far enough from where Rain was sitting, leaving a sharp demarcation on the horse's back where the effect had ended. Carten apparently thought this was the funniest thing ever from how hard he was laughing.

This was enough to attract Lavarro's attention. She clucked to the horse, halting it, then inspected the line marking the edge of Rain's aura.

“What skill was that?” she asked. Rain was elated that he understood her whole sentence.

“Purify,” he replied, smiling.

She looked at Jamus questioningly. Jamus was smiling smugly. Lavarro turned back to Rain, giving him an appraising look.

“Use it,” she commanded.

“Sorry, mana,” Rain replied with a shrug.

“How long?”

“One hour, two,” Rain replied, wiggling his hand ambivalently, giving her the time at which he would be recovered enough to use the skill again for a useful duration.

“Ok, we <something> in one hour,” she said, clucking to the horse again and continuing down the road.

Rain repeated the unfamiliar phrase to Jamus questioningly, who tried to explain, but was interrupted. Mahria jumped in, sweeping Jamus's hat off his head and onto her own. Leaning against the side of the cart, she pulled the hat down over her eyes and started snoring exaggeratedly. *Sleep? No, that doesn't make sense. Rest? Rest in one hour?*

Jamus snatched his hat back from her and swatted her with it, replacing it on his head. Mahria stuck her tongue out at him, then looked down at her freshly cleaned robe and laughed. Without warning, she laid an arm around Rain's back, giving him a side-on hug before jostling him around playfully and releasing him. Rain looked at her, awkwardly smiling.

Damn it, I'm not good with girls.

“You're welcome,” he said, trying to keep his face from turning red.

Jamus saved him, saying something to Mahria which caused her face to light up. He was pointing to a large rock on the left side of the road ahead of them.

Mahria grinned and picked up her staff, pointing it at the rock as it moved by. She shouted a word and shot a white spike of some sort at the rock, missing by a comical margin.

Jamus scoffed, then pointed at the rock with a finger, shouting a different word. A blast of blue light shot from his fingertip, splashing against the rock and leaving a small scorch mark. Mahria tried again, missing once more but by much less this time. The two alternated for a few more shots, Jamus consistently hitting his target without trying, Mahria making perhaps one shot in three. When they rolled too far out of range they picked a new target and continued for a little while, stopping when Mahria slumped down in a huff, rubbing at her eye sockets. *Out of mana I guess.*

Target practice completed, Mahria rested quietly while Jamus jumped down to walk beside Carten for a bit, speaking quietly to the man. Looking at the pained expression on Mahria's face, Rain belatedly realized that he had forgotten to re-activate winter. He did so, using amplify to increase the effect as much as he could. *I don't know how much clarity she has, but an extra 11% regen is better than nothing. Should help a bit. So she is some sort of ice mage, and Jamus uses... blue energy stuff. Jamus has more mana, and much better aim.*

Soon enough, Lavarro called a halt and drew the cart to the side of the road.

“Thirty minutes,” she said, sitting on the back of the cart and pulling a ration brick from her pack without ceremony, taking an effortless bite of the rock hard ration bar.

Rain followed her example, pulling out his own ration and gnawing at it with significantly more care for his teeth. Carten set down his shields and tended to the horse, giving it a feed bag of oats but not unhitching it. He then fished out his own ration bar and bit off half of it with a single bite. Mahria wandered over to the tree line and sat against one, fishing out a packet of what looked like beef jerky from her bag, as well as half of the loaf of bread from earlier. Jamus was drinking from a large flask, and Rain was pretty sure from the smell that it contained chicken soup. *I'm not sure if that is stupid, or brilliant,* Rain thought as he gnawed at his tasteless ration.

After the promised 30 minutes had passed, Lavarro beckoned Rain down from the cart and hollered at the others, getting them to gather up. “Use it,” she said, once everyone had grouped around them.

Rain nodded, then activated Purify, draining out his mana again, which was mostly recovered after the hour and a half since his last use of the aura. Looking at the appreciative looks on most of his companion's faces, Rain tried to keep himself from smiling too widely. *Yes, stand in awe of the all-powerful magus of dry-cleaning!*

Unlike the others, Lavarro appeared indifferent, simply nodding to him by way of thanks. She walked back towards the road and got the horse moving. Instead of hopping up in the back, Rain quickened his pace and caught up to her, trying to start up a conversation. She answered his direct questions with just a curt yes or no, though some she just ignored entirely. Eventually, she turned and glared at him until he retreated back behind the horse where it was safe.

Carten laughed and clapped him on the back, the weight of the shield strapped to his arm crashing against Rain's shoulders and almost sending him sprawling to the ground. Carten just laughed again and pitched him up into the cart like a sack of potatoes, somehow managing to land him in the cart bed without crashing into either of the others.

Jamus was laughing too as he helped steady Rain in the cart to prevent him from falling out. Mahria was curled into a ball, apparently asleep or pretending to be. Rain tried to ask what Lavarro's deal was, but Jamus just laughed again and shook his head. "Lavarro is the boss," he said, leaving it at that.

The group continued down the road, the farmland transitioning to rolling, rocky hills as the road wound onward. Rain continued his language lessons with Jamus and Carten plodded on tirelessly, bringing up the rear. Rain periodically activated purify, jumping out to walk next to Lavarro as he used it, then slowly letting the cart catch up so he got the entire group by the time his mana was expended. He repeated this four times before Lavarro called a halt at a bridge crossing a small stream.

"We will camp here," she said, starting to unhitch the horse from the cart. Rain hopped down and moved hesitantly to help her, having gotten over his fear of the horse but feeling uneasy around the intimidating woman. She waved him off and he retreated to see about making a fire. The others set about making camp, Jamus cooking up a pot of stew using a boar-rabbit that Carten had run down earlier in the day. Watching the man in full plate sprint after the animal with the speed of an Olympic athlete had been equal parts amazing, hilarious, and terrifying. After they had eaten, Rain took care of the cleanup to everyone's appreciation.

Carten set himself up on a stump to take watch and the others pulled out thin bedrolls from their packs. Not having a bedroll, or even a blanket, Rain tried to find the most comfortable patch of dirt he could find and settled down. He focused on winter as he drifted away, trying to maintain the aura as his consciousness faded.

14: Math

Rain woke before his alarm and experienced some momentary disorientation. He was curled up against a rock and quite damp from the morning dew. The sun was just coming up. He shivered. The fire had gone out in the night and being without a blanket had left him with a pretty severe chill.

He rose, rubbing his arms and looking around. Carten was still on watch but the others were all asleep in their bedrolls. *Does the man even sleep?* Rain wondered, his thoughts sluggish. He moved about quietly, searching for more firewood to restart the fire. There weren't many trees around, but there was plenty of scrub brush and it was fairly dry, even with the dew. As he searched, he realized that not all of the chill was coming from the cool air.

Yes! It worked! My aura is still active!

Rain had been practicing with his auras for the whole day yesterday, using winter to keep his regeneration boosted between bouts of purification. He was getting a bit annoyed at how low the boost was and how slowly the skill was gaining experience. Trying to shove more mana into it did nothing, the barrier in his mind resisting all attempts to force it wider, only allowing a set flow of mana and that was it.

Amplify and extend were sort of like side channels that he could open or close, adding to the mana consumed by the skill, but not directly. He'd also tried reducing the flow, trying to reduce the mana consumption of purify down to something he could maintain all day. He'd had no luck with that either; the skill consumed mana at a fixed rate. Trying to use less than that would cut off the flow completely, the barrier re-sealing itself and stopping his mana from flowing out into the world.

Rain had gotten pretty annoyed at this, asking the other mages if there was any way to control the mana output of a spell. Neither Jamus nor Mahria had an answer that satisfied him. Jamus had explained that spells worked with a sort of threshold. You pressed mana against the barrier until the threshold was reached, then it would burst out into the effect you wanted, after which the barrier would close. Channeled spells such as Rain's auras were rare, at least at their level. Neither Jamus nor Mahria had any. He hadn't bothered asking Lavarro or Carten for different reasons in each person's case.

There has to be more to it, winter feels so natural compared to the others. Rain tried varying the output of winter as he shoved some twigs into the fire, trying to get them to catch on the coals. He almost felt as if it was working, but the drain of the aura was so slow he couldn't tell if it was having any effect.

Why is winter different? I was even able to keep it on overnight. It feels less like a spell, and more like, well, just part of me. Maybe I've just been using it long enough? Skills get experience when you use them, but that is just numbers. Can you get better at a skill with practicing it, independent of what the

system says? It makes sense, hard to see with an aura, but Mahria's aim is an obvious sign that skills and spells don't take care of everything.

Rain got the fire to catch at last and slowly started feeding in larger branches as the flames rekindled. He activated his purification aura and sat near the fire to dry out from the damp, watching as the ash in the fire pit dissolved under the assault of his aura. Even the smoke from the fire was attenuated. He focused on the feeling of purify, trying to feel the flow of the mana and understand how it was working.

He ran out of mana before managing to glean anything further about the skill, switching back to winter automatically. He stared at the flames, thinking about magic and skills until his alarm went off, the others seeming to jerk awake at the same time. Carten stood and walked to the cart. He tossed his shields in, then clambered up after them. He pulled a blanket from his pack and wrapped himself up in it, not even removing his armor.

I guess he does sleep. Walking for me today, then. Damn, he is frickin' 'uge! He practically fills that wagon. Rain pulled up his training overview as the others started to rise and move about the camp.

| Training Overview |
|---|
| <u>General Experience Earned</u> |
| Stamina Use: 55 |
| Mana Use: 1039 |
| <u>Skill Experience Earned</u> |
| Extend Aura: 99 [Rank Up] |
| Purify: 825 [Rank Up] |
| Winter: 16 |
| Amplify Aura: 99 [Rank Up] |
| Intrinsic Clarity: 1039 [Rank Up] [Rank Up] |

Holy fuck yes! That is what I am talking about! Dynamo's mana regeneration is going to make leveling up skills so much faster. Five ranks in just one day! And it is only going to get better. Intrinsic clarity increases regeneration, and with the boost from dynamo, my clarity attribute counts for triple. No level up for my class though.

Calling up his attributes screen, Rain saw that the experience requirement for level 6 Dynamo was 2021 experience, quite a jump from the 700 it had taken to get to level 5 Unclassed. At 1686, he was getting there, but still had a ways to go. While he had the window open, he checked his regeneration, seeing that he was now gaining about 200 mana per hour when winter was active.

*Awesome, I can use purify for 200 mana every hour, on the hour; that is 3600 a day assuming eighteen hours awake. I'll be level 6 tomorrow, if I can keep up with the schedule, that is. Purify will probably level too, maybe more than once. Let's see. **Skills.***

Skills

Refrigerate (3/10) Exp: 104/400

22-25 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 15 mp/s

Extend Aura (2/10) Exp: 91/200

Extend aura range by 2 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 140%

Purify (4/10) Exp: 639/700

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 4 meters

Cost: 40 mp/min

Winter (1/10) Exp: 47/100

Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (5/10) Exp: 334/1100

Multiply base mana regeneration by 200%

Amplify Aura (2/10) Exp: 26/200

Multiply aura intensity by 120%

Multiply aura mana cost by 140%

Free Skill Points: 0

Wow, 4 meters for purify, that is no joke. And with extend I can get to 6. That would let me cover practically the whole quest hall in the guild if I was standing in the center. That is insane! I feel like the effect is working faster as it levels too. Maybe I should spend some time on refrigeration today, 6 meters for that would be nuts, but the mana cost would be... yeah wow, that skill's mana cost is insane. I'd drain myself dry in a few seconds, assuming the cost scales linearly with level. What was I looking for? Right, experience costs.

Rain looked through his skills, trying to figure out the progression of the leveling costs. Level 1 was 100, 2 was 200, so double, and 3 was 400, double again. Thankfully, level four only took 700, not 800, so it didn't look like it was just doubling, as Rain knew that would get out of hand quickly. At 1100, level 5 didn't make a bunch of sense to him. Opening his notebook, Rain played around with the numbers, trying to work out the sequence.

100, 200, 400, 700, 1100, ...? Damn, this is like one of those standard math problems. I always sucked at those. Let's see here, it isn't doubling, that would be 200, 400, 800, 1600. Humm, addition, but it is adding a different amount each time, so subtract one from the next gives 100, 200, 300, 400, oh, I see. So it should be 100, 200, 400, 700, 1100, 1600, 2200, and so forth. 100 more each time, adding to the last level, and it resets to 0 when you rank up.

Rain played with the numbers a little bit more, working out the mathematics and using refrigerate as an example. *So right now, I can spend 3600 mana a day or thereabouts, so if I use nothing but refrigerate...wait, something doesn't make sense here.* Recalling his training review, he compared the numbers against his estimate for how much mana he had used the day before. He cross-checked a few things, running sums and trying to build an understanding of what exactly was going on.

Damn it, too many variables. I should have finished college... Rain thought to himself, ignoring the fact that this was basic algebra, not anything like calculus or differential equations. *It isn't 1 to 1, I know that much. I was using purify until I was flat out of mana, so that would have been way more than 900, but it isn't 2 to 1 either; otherwise winter would be higher. Do extend and amplify count towards the skill, or as their own thing? Maybe it counts twice? Intrinsic clarity definitely counts things twice, no, three times, purify, intrinsic clarity, and class experience. Gah.*

Rain continued to struggle with the math, dreaming of a computer until he heard his name called in an impatient tone. The others were waiting for him, the cart waiting on the road ready to go.

“Shit, sorry,” Rain cursed as he got to his feet. He tucked away his notebook and kicked out the fire, making sure it was well and truly out before hurrying to catch up with the others. He fell into step as Lavarro got the cart rolling, struggling to move his sore legs to the quick pace that she set.

He didn't have the luxury of his notebook as they walked, so he made do with practicing his language with Jamus using the point and name game. He thought he was getting a bit better at remembering the various names of land features, but sentence structure was still a bit of a mystery. Mostly, he just tried to copy the others and say things the same way they did. Progress was slow. Rain again wished for a translation spell, but doggedly continued to put in the work as they continued down the road.

By the time they stopped for lunch, Rain's legs were screaming in protest and his stamina was almost to zero. He was having trouble keeping up with the pace Lavarro had set. His mana was doing fine despite him using purify every hour to drain it all out. Jamus had commented on the expanded range, but didn't seem to notice the slightly stronger glow of the aura that came with the increased level. Everyone was already spotless, so the faster cleaning wasn't that apparent. Nobody seemed to have noticed the colonic implications of the aura yet, and Rain was eagerly awaiting the moment when someone realized that they hadn't had to use the bathroom since yesterday. That was going to be great.

The group made do with ration bars and other, less jaw destroying trail food as they hadn't managed to find any other wildlife in the rocky hills. Carten had woken up as they stopped for lunch, hopping down from the cart, apparently fully recovered. Rain climbed up into the back of the cart with relief, folding his aching legs and scooting over to make room for Mahria and Jamus to join him.

They continued through the afternoon, the scraggly trees and brush growing a bit more sparse as the terrain grew craggy and mountainous. The road wound between the hills, still heading in the same general direction, though there weren't any more travelers this far out. He was on edge at the thought of monsters like the musk wolf, far as he was from the safety of the city and the patrols of the Watch. The

others didn't seem too concerned, but he did note that Lavarro and Carten were keeping an active lookout even as the others goofed around in the cart.

As night was falling, Lavarro brought the cart to a halt near a small dirt track splitting off from the main road and heading up into the hills. It seemed they would be stopping here for the night, so Rain walked about collecting firewood. It was a bit harder to come by out here, so his search ended up sending him a bit further from the others. He noticed a commotion as he returned to the camp with an armload of wood. Setting it down near where he had intended to start the fire, he watched as Mahria shot bolts of ice at Carten, who was blocking them with his shields. He seemed to be going out of his way to get hit, diving for the bolts in some cases to catch them on his shield even when they would clearly have missed.

Training, then, not a fight.

Mahria stomped off after a little while in a huff at her inability to get a single bolt through Carten's defense. Carten was laughing at this, but shut up quickly as a bolt of blue light struck him right in the face, launched by a sniggering Jamus. Carten wasn't wearing his helmet but didn't seem too hurt, just agitated, shouting loudly as he chased after Jamus, blocking shot after shot with his shields. Eventually, Jamus hid behind Lavarro, who to Rain's surprise didn't get mad, simply ignoring the two men circling around her as she sat silently watching the road.

Jamus made a break for it, but Carten caught him with a shield rush, sending him sprawling to the ground. Laughing, Carten relaxed and then leaned down to give the dusty mage a hand up, clapping him on the shoulder and almost sending him to the ground again. Rain winced in sympathy for the poor mage. Carten wasn't exactly gentle.

Seeing Rain watching, Carten walked over to him, leaving Jamus to nurse his wounds.

“Want to try?” the big man asked him, grinning through his bushy black beard.

Sure, why the heck not. Let's see if he can block an aura.

Rain nodded, readying refrigerate and moving to within his estimated range of the big man.

“Ready?” Rain asked. Carten crouched and banged his shields together by way of response.

Rain nodded and started to focus on refrigerate, extending the aura, but not amplifying it. He didn't want to really hurt the man, so he was ready to shut it down if it looked like it was doing any real damage. As the wave of cold rushed towards Carten, he slammed his shields together and ducked behind them. The flat inside edges of the two shields interlocked, one having a raised flange that covered the seam. The cold washed against them, but then flowed over and around, reaching for the man hiding behind the wall of metal.

Carten seemed momentarily shocked by this, not having expected this form of attack. Rain almost canceled the aura, but he kept it on as he heard laughter coming from behind the shields. Carten stood, frost forming on the metal of his armor as he took a step towards Rain. He started walking toward Rain with a wide grin on his face, his arms spread wide.

Shocked at the ineffectiveness of his aura, Rain activated amplify, pushing as hard as he could. Carten didn't even seem to notice the difference. Rain frantically waved his hands at him in defeat, canceling the aura completely. His mana was totally drained after the few seconds of combat, despite having been near full. The frosted ground cracked as Carten walked up to Rain and clapped him on the shoulder. Rain winced, then smiled up at the man, shrugging.

Damn. I guess it is only good against slimes at this level. Carten is a beast.

Mahria walked up to Rain, having returned at some point to watch the fight.

“What was that skill?” she asked, indicating the melting circle of frost on the ground.

“Aura,” Rain said, shrugging, failing to remember the common word for the skill. He'd asked the adventurers at the guild for the names of several tier 0 skills, but he'd neglected to write most of them down.

Mahria paused, then, staring off into space, started swiping at something Rain couldn't see. He did recognize the motion though, figuring that she was paging through the skill window.

Well, there is one question answered. Other people have the same interface, or at least a similar one. It isn't just me.

Eventually, Mahria seemed to find what she was looking for, turning to him and speaking a word with a questioning tone. It sounded familiar, but he didn't recognize it. Unsure, he simply shrugged.

She crouched down and sketched out a circle about a meter in radius on the ground around herself, then looked at him questioningly. She pointed at the circle of frost around him, repeating the word, then pointed at the fire, saying a different word. *Yeah, looks like she found it.*

Rain nodded. “Refrigerate,” he pointed to the aura around him, using the same word she had used.

The other one must have been immolate. I'll try to remember that this time.

Mahria sniffed, seeming to lose interest, muttering something about mana as she walked back towards the fire.

Yeah, tell me about it, Rain thought as he followed her, sitting down and fishing out a ration bar from his pack.

Jamus joined them and sat next to Rain who was watching Mahria across the fire. Her green eyes were captivating. The mage tapped Rain on the shoulder and leaned in to whisper to him.

“Careful.”

“What?” Rain whispered back.

“Mahria. Be careful.”

“What? Why?”

“She is Lavarro’s <something>.”

Jamus motioned to Rain’s pack, then made a writing motion. Rain pulled out his notebook and handed it to the man. Jamus started sketching in the notebook. He drew a quick doodle of the two women, then another figure that Rain didn’t recognize. He connected Lavarro and the unfamiliar man with a line. He then extended it with an arrow to point to Mahria, who was drawn in above the other figures. He started labeling the diagram, but Rain had already caught on.

It’s like a family tree, just upside down! Shit, she’s Lavarro’s daughter. Warning taken.

Jamus taught him the words for the relationships between the people, Rain taking the notebook back to fill in the phonetic translations in English. When they had finished, he felt like it would be safe enough to ask a question. He kept his voice to a whisper though.

“Her father? Who?”

“You wouldn’t like him.”

Mahria had started watching the whispering pair curiously, so Rain decided that he should probably mind his own business. He sighed and picked his ration bar back up from where he had left it. He gnawed at it unenthusiastically, his poor jaw almost as sore as his legs.

15: Mine

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Stamina Use: 70

Mana Use: 1276

[Level Up]

Skill Experience Earned

Refrigerate: 90

Extend Aura: 97

Purify: 913 [Rank Up]

Winter: 23

Amplify Aura: 153

Intrinsic Clarity: 1276 [Rank Up]

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 6

Experience: 1009/2626

Dynamo

| | |
|---------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |

| | |
|-----------|----|
| Strength | 10 |
| Recovery | 10 |
| Endurance | 10 |
| Vigor | 10 |
| Focus | 10 |
| Clarity | 80 |

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Free Points | 0 |
|-------------|---|

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|---------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100/day | 100/day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 244/hr | 220/hr | -2 12% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| | | | |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Skills

Refrigerate (3/10) Exp: 194/400

22-25 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 15 mp/s

Extend Aura (2/10) Exp: 188/200

Extend aura range by 2 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 140%

Purify (5/10) Exp: 852/1100

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 5 meters

Cost: 50 mp/min

Winter (1/10) Exp: 70/100

Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (6/10) Exp: 510/1600

Multiply base mana regeneration by 220%

Amplify Aura (2/10) Exp: 179/200

Multiply aura intensity by 120%

Multiply aura mana cost by 140%

Free Skill Points: 1

Rain sat, trying to decide what to do with his skill point. He had invested his stat points into clarity, honoring his promise to himself to get the stat to 100 before considering spending points elsewhere. The faster experience gain from his mana regeneration was just too good to pass up. He looked through his aura trees but didn't see anything that was really calling to him. Briefly, he considered taking a spell like firebolt to give himself a more efficient way of dealing damage at range. He decided against it fairly quickly, however. His two aura metamagic skills would do nothing for it and he didn't know if there was some limit on the number of skill points he could earn. It felt like a waste of a point to him, given that refrigerate with extend aura had decent enough range now.

Furthermore, he was sure that there would be more boosts to auras in the higher skill tiers and he was pretty invested in them at this point. Curious about what Tier 1 might hold, he spent the 100 experience required to unlock the next level of spells for the offensive auras tree.

Offensive Auras

Tier 0

Immolate (0/10) (+)

7-8 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Refrigerate (3/10) Exp: 194/400

22-25 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 15 mp/s

Tier 1

Radiance (0/10)

7-8 light (fcs) damage per second to entities

Brightens environment (fcs)

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Requires 5 ranks in immolate

Shroud (0/10)

7-8 dark (fcs) damage per second to entities

Darkens environment (fcs)

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Requires 5 ranks in refrigerate

Shear (0/10)

7-8 force (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Not occluded by mundane materials

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 10 mp/s

Requires 15 ranks in offensive auras

Huh, they have prerequisites. I can't take any of these. Shroud I could get to with a bit of work. Shear sounds like it would be quite unpleasant to experience, and it goes through walls if I am reading that right. Ouch. Taking that one for sure once I can. I really should work on refrigerate more so I can unlock the others.

Setting the offensive tree aside, Rain proceeded to unlock tier 1 for both utility auras and aura metamagic. He didn't bother with defensive auras, figuring he wouldn't meet any of the prerequisites. He could revisit it later if he didn't see anything he liked in utility.

Utility Auras

Tier 0

Purify (5/10) Exp: 852/1100

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 5 meters

Cost: 50 mp/min

Spring (0/10) (+)

Multiply S.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Summer (0/10) (+)

Multiply H.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Winter (1/10) Exp: 70/100

Multiply M.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Tier 1

Detection (0/10) (+)

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 1.0 meters

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/s

Requires 5 ranks in utility auras

Velocity (0/10) (+)

10% boost to speed for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/s

Requires 5 ranks in utility auras

Life Well (0/10)

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

Transfer Rate: 1 hp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 1 meter

Requires 5 ranks in summer

Energy Well (0/10)

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

Transfer Rate: 1 sp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 1 meter

Requires 5 ranks in spring

Essence Well (0/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 1 mp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Requires 5 ranks in winter

Detection sounds useful, like a radar or something. I wonder how it works? If it is anything like purify it is probably broken as shit. Velocity sounds nice too. Is that 10% speed to just allies, or everything? That is the difference between a travel aura and one I can use in combat.

The others I won't be getting any time soon thanks to how slowly the seasonal auras level. They look really good though. The life well one would let me be a healer. I'm going to need some survivability if I am serious about this adventurer thing, and being able to heal would go a long way towards that.

Humm, I'll check metamagic before I make my choice but I think detection is the winner. Once I get the range up, I can use it to scan for hidden treasure or monsters. Not sure about the resolution, but even if that doesn't get better it will at least tell me what direction something is in.

Aura Metamagic

Tier 0

Extend Aura (2/10) Exp: 188/200

Extend aura range by 2 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 140%

Amplify Aura (2/10) Exp: 179/200

Multiply aura intensity by 120%

Multiply aura mana cost by 140%

Tier 1

Aura Focus (0/10)

Focus on an aura to boost its output

Multiply aura intensity by 120%

Multiply aura range by 120%
Multiply aura mana cost by 120%
User loses all external senses while focusing
Requires 5 ranks in amplify aura
Requires 5 ranks in extend aura

Aura Synergy (0/10)

Increase all aura output by 0.1% for each rank in any aura
Requires 1 rank in 5 different auras

Humm, aura focus. That must have been what Ameliah was using to boost purify like that. I guess that is what it takes to dissolve a musk wolf. Synergy looks pretty weak, but...damn, that could be really strong eventually. No point bothering with defensive auras, I wouldn't meet the prerequisites, so that just leaves velocity and detection. Yeah, detection it is.

Rain's finger hovered over the (+) next to the skill.

Oh, wait, I could save the point and use it to get shroud once I level up refrigerate. Hummm.

Nah, instant gratification it is.

Rain selected detection, adding his point and hitting apply, then closed out of all his menus to give it a test drive.

Detection

Winter deactivated and a little radar icon appeared.

Hah, called it. Now, let's see, how do I...

Rain concentrated, watching his mana start to tick down. He didn't sense anything different, however.

Humm, specified items of interest, it says, so how about a Tel.

Focusing on the image of a Tel, Rain activated the aura, then freaked out at the sensation invading his brain. He could FEEL the Tel in his pocket in a way that was completely unlike anything he had ever experienced before. It was as if he simply knew them to be there but not by sight, smell, touch, or any other sense. It wasn't even like memory or intuition. The sense was something...else. Rain didn't have the words to describe it.

I can feel them, they are close, but...damn. It's fuzzy. This must be the resolution thing. Humm, how specific can I be with this?

Rain stopped thinking about Tel and concentrated on the image of a stick. He got up and walked around the campsite, feeling sticks entering and leaving his sphere of perception. The fuzziness meant that he couldn't tell exactly where they were, or anything about them, really, just that they were there. He switched his focus several times, trying different objects. It seemed he could be pretty specific with the

item he chose but there were some limitations. For example, 'hat' was a searchable item but 'Jamus's hat' was not. General terms worked as well. 'Clothes', for example, left him with the feeling of each of his various articles of clothing in his mind, each slightly different but still hazy and non-localized. There was a limit to the number of objects he could keep track of but that was more to do with his brain feeling like it was trying to escape his skull than anything about the skill itself.

Rain's mana ran out and he felt like his gray matter was leaking out of his ears but he was smiling to himself. He was satisfied with his choice and already thinking of ways to abuse his new-found power.

The group continued up the dirt track all morning, stopping briefly for lunch. Rain had been periodically using purify, not wanting to get off the cart to use refrigerate. Carten had kept watch again last night but was walking along as if he had gotten a full night's sleep. He hadn't commandeered the cart this time but the lack of sleep didn't seem to be bothering him. A few hours into the afternoon, the path came to an end at the entrance of a mine cut into the side of one of the rocky hills.

The door of the mine was wooden and a bar was lowered over it, looking as if it had been added after the fact. Somebody clearly hadn't wanted whatever was in the mine to get out. Lavarro brought them to a halt and unhitched the horse, tying its lead to a tree with sufficient slack for it to graze. She then turned to the group.

“This is Vekuavak Mine. We are here to get <something> and bring them back to the city. Questions?”

Finally! Now she explains? Not the hundred other times I have asked her? Why was she keeping us in the dark? She didn't even tell the others; all Jamus knew was that we were going to a mine.

“<Something>?” Rain asked, inquiring as to the identity of the MacGuffins they had been sent to retrieve.

“Not you. Any other questions?” Lavarro shut Rain down hard. In response, Rain flipped her off, smiling a deliberately fake smile and doubting she would understand the gesture.

Jamus gave Rain an apologetic look. “How many?” he asked.

“Fifteen.”

“Monsters?” chimed in Carten.

“Unknown.”

“Treasure?” Mahria asked.

“Unknown.”

“Why didn't the miners take the <somethings>?” Jamus asked, Rain guessing the word ‘miner’ from context and the fact that it shared a root with 'mine'.

“Because they are dead.”

Rain gulped.

“Drink these. Five minutes, then we go in. Rest. No magic.” Lavarro fished out a number of small vials from her pack and handed one to each of the party, hesitating before she grudgingly handed Rain his, then downed one herself and squatted down to wait.

Rain looked at the vial curiously. It contained a dark green liquid flecked with blue. Seeing that the others didn't seem concerned, he shrugged, pulled the cork, and drank it down. The taste was...not great.

Better than raw sewage at least. Fuck do I wish I didn't have the experience to make that comparison.

Rain was distracted from the taste by an unfamiliar sound. There was the crashing of a gong accompanied a new addition to his log. He brought up the message dialog, revealing a message type he hadn't seen before.

Chemical Effect Activated

Minor Traveler's Aid
+400 sp/hr, 4hr duration
+400 mp/hr, 4hr duration

Wow, that is pretty good. I need to buy some of these.

“Jamus.” Rain motioned to the man.

“Yeah?”

“This...drink. How many Tel?”

“Humm? 30, 40 maybe. Lavarro made them, so I don't know the <something> price.”

Rain's eyes bulged slightly, then he gulped, still fighting the nasty taste in his mouth. He didn't want to use purify at risk of Lavarro's wrath. ‘No magic’, she had said.

Well, guess I'm not going to be drinking a lot of these any time soon, it just isn't worth it. Man, how much is this job paying if she is willing to dole out 5 of them?

Belatedly, Rain realized that his winter aura was still on, so he shut it down to comply with Lavarro's command. It felt odd to be without it after leaving it on almost constantly for so long. As he canceled the skill, Lavarro turned her head suddenly to look at him, her sharp green eyes freezing him in place.

“No, keep that on. Only that. Nothing else.”

Rain quickly reactivated the skill. Lavarro narrowed her eyes, then nodded and went back to ignoring him.

Wow, I didn't think any of them other than Jamus had noticed. I guess I'm worth something to them, even if the boost is tiny.

Turning to Jamus, Rain asked him to explain what they were retrieving, but he didn't get what the man was trying to mime before Lavarro rose to her feet and called them over.

She lit a torch, then motioned to Carten to take the lead into the mine. She followed him closely, holding the light up high. Rain and Mahria followed at Jamus's urging, the older mage taking up the rear. The mine was dark, and Rain couldn't see much from his position in the middle of the group. They traveled downward for about five minutes before coming to a large, open cavern. There were various bits of mining equipment lying around, and several tunnels off of the chamber. Rain was disappointed that there were no mine carts or tracks, just hewn stone and timber framing.

Lavarro gestured Rain over to a wall, where there was a rack holding three miner's picks. "Take the <some things>."

Ah, so that is what that flailing motion Jamus was making meant. Picks. We are here to get the miner's picks. But... why? There must be something special about them.

Rain examined one of the picks as he took it down off the wall, struggling with the weight. It was much heavier than it looked. As he examined it, he noticed that the metal of the pick head was glowing slightly.

Magic?

"Hurry up," Lavarro hissed at him in a whisper, not taking her eyes away from the side tunnels leading off of the room.

Grabbing the other two picks, Rain balanced them precariously in his arms, walking back to the group.

"Mahria, help him. Bring them up, then <something>. Quietly."

Mahria lit a torch from Lavarro's, then took one of the picks from Rain. The two of them headed back up, depositing them in the cart before returning to the cavern.

Lavarro led them down the first of the side passages. The passage had a low ceiling and continued for only 20 meters or so before coming to a dead end. There was rubble strewn about, as well as another pick lying on the ground as if the miner who had been working here had dropped it in haste. Lavarro picked it up, then, seeing nothing else of interest, led them back to the main room.

She sent Rain and Mahria up with the pick again, and they returned to repeat the procedure, checking two more tunnels but not finding another pick. There was only one tunnel left, and it was the largest, sloping down sharply. They proceeded down it slowly, huddling within the perceived safety of the torchlight. Looking at the walls, Rain could see veins of coal running through them, with an occasional glint of something shiny lodged in the stone. It looked like iron, or maybe impure silver. Eventually, the tunnel opened up into another chamber, much like the first, except that this one was filled with corpses.

Rain counted five bodies that looked like they had been human as well as one that clearly hadn't been. Jamus walked over to the form of the dog-like creature, grabbing the pick that was embedded in its skull and wrenching it free.

“Dark <something>, very dead,” he said, walking over to Rain and handing him the pick, which was stained by the creature's blood. Rain took it gingerly, searching the dark tunnels leading from the room with no small amount of apprehension. Jamus also looked a bit unsettled, but Carten and Lavarro didn't seem too concerned. Mahria was smiling, which almost concerned Rain more than the body of the twisted dog thing.

“We continue. Quiet,” Lavarro said, leading them towards the first side passage.

The next two passages were also dead ends, one literally. The passage ended in a small chamber containing two more miners, their bodies having been torn apart. All of the corpses Rain had seen in the mine were mostly decayed, which was all that was keeping him in control of himself. He wasn't used to death. The decayed state of the bodies helped him distance himself from thinking about how they had been real, living, breathing people once. Nonetheless, these last two had given him some significant trouble, as he got stuck thinking about how the shredded corpses had gotten that way, being torn limb from limb by some terrible monster in the dark.

Rain was brought back by fingers snapping in his face. He let out a strangled yelp, and a hand pressed against his mouth, silencing him. Lavarro then slapped him, her eyes glaring at him in anger.

“Quiet, I said. Now come.”

She turned, moving towards the others who Rain now saw were looking on with concern. Mahria had two more picks with her that she had collected while Rain had been staring at the bodies. Lavarro didn't wait, leading the others back up the tunnel. Rain scrambled to follow, terrified at the prospect of being left alone in the dark. When they reached the lower cavern again, Lavarro sent Mahria and Jamus back up with the picks. Rain figured that she thought he wouldn't come back if she sent him. That was probably justified. He fought down his fear and resisted the urge to make a break for the surface. He wasn't going to go off alone and die like some idiot in a horror movie.

The others returned, but before the group could start down another tunnel, Carten raised a hand, halting them. He was looking towards one of the tunnels, listening. Then, Rain heard it too, a faint clicking, like the nails of a dog walking on asphalt.

“Ready!” Carten shouted, all pretense of stealth falling away. He clanged his shields together and placed himself between the opening of the tunnel and the rest of the group. The sound rang out like a wave, echoing off the walls of the chamber. His shields were glowing slightly, streams of whitish light flowing down them like water and evaporating as they hit the floor.

Mahria pointed her staff and looked at the tunnel with anticipation, trying to get an angle past the huge form of Carten. Lavarro and Jamus threw their torches to the sides of the room, the lights still burning and lighting the area though it left them slightly in shadow. Jamus chanted a few short sentences, then shouted, summoning two translucent whips which he held at the ready. Blue light shone from the whips and they crackled with intermittent bolts of electricity. Lavarro stood watching the tunnel intently but showing no other sign of preparing herself for battle. Her face was cool and focused.

I... I can't do anything. Refrigerate is useless here. I'd just hit my allies.

Rain came to this realization as the first monster trotted out of the tunnel. *Dark Hound, Level 5*, Rain noted, as two more followed it, fanning out to surround the group. Rain could hear howling coming from deeper in the mine, and he stepped back, looking for something he could use as a weapon. He drew his belt knife, holding it in one hand and hoping that he wouldn't need it. If one of those things got close enough for him to use the knife, he was sure that he would be as good as dead.

Mahria didn't wait for any more of the beasts to appear. Seeing a clear shot, she took it, launching a bolt of ice at the leftmost dark hound, striking it in the flank and causing it to let out a pained yelp from its twisted maw. The enraged hound staggered, then lunged for her. Carten moved faster than Rain would have believed possible, smashing into the beast with a shield and sending it flying across the room where it slammed into a wall with a terrible crunching sound. This left the right side open, but before the two dark hounds could take advantage of it, Jamus lashed out with his whips, snaring each of them around the neck and then shouting a word. There was a terrible crack and two bolts of lightning shot along the whips, following the blue energy straight to the hounds and frying them instantly. Rain opened his eyes after slamming them shut against the brightness of the flash. He saw that all three dark hounds were down, one crushed and broken against the wall and the other two burned, blackened, and smoking. Jamus was chanting again, his whips apparently consumed by the spell.

The howls were drawing closer, and soon more dark hounds started pouring into the room from the tunnels, quickly surrounding them. Jamus lashed out with his re-summoned whips, leaving charred gouges where the whips struck but not entangling the creatures as before. He was doing much less damage this way but he was successful at keeping the hounds back in a fairly wide area.

Carten was holding the front, an impassible wall of muscle and steel, sending any hound foolish enough to get close flying but doing little to thin the pack. He was holding himself back to protect Mahria. She had her eyes closed and her hands pressed to the ground, staff propped against her neck. There was a look of immense concentration on her face as she muttered something Rain couldn't make out.

Rain clutched his dagger desperately as one of the hounds suddenly charged straight for him. Lavarro stepped calmly to meet it, and the hound suddenly collapsed to the ground, its neck twisted grotesquely. Another hound followed the first, but it too fell as Lavarro simply looked at it, making no move that could have explained what had happened. This time, though, Rain heard the sickening crack as the hound's neck snapped.

Rain hadn't even had time to process this before he was startled by a shout from Mahria which was suddenly followed by a blast of cold wind. The torchlight from the left of the cavern was suddenly cut off as a massive wall of ice erupted from the ground, slamming into the ceiling with a glacial grinding noise and blocking off the hounds on that side. Mahria collapsed, panting, as the three others took up protective positions, shielding Rain and Mahria in the center with the wall of ice protecting their backs.

Freed from the need to cover the mage, Carten started putting more force behind his strikes, many of the hounds he sent flying not getting back up, their health bars winking out as they crumpled to the ground. One of the hounds managed to make it past his guard and latched onto his armored leg, teeth screeching against his armor and locking down his movement. Carten swore and slammed his shield

down on the beast's back, shattering its spine with a terrible crunch and sending a splatter of dark blood flying into the air.

Jamus was having better luck on his side. His whips were starting to take their toll on the creatures, who were too slow to avoid the blinding blue trails of energy as he laid into them. They didn't relent though, their pain only building their frenzy as they rushed in even more heedlessly of their own lives.

One slipped inside one of his strikes and went straight for him, causing him to drop one of his whips and point at the hound with his finger. He sent a blue bolt of energy straight through its chest moments before its teeth latched on to his face. The monster's corpse bowled him over, but before more could rush in, Mahria stepped up. Seemingly recovered, she started blasting shards of ice at the hounds from the tip of her staff, not even bothering to properly aim. It was surprisingly effective, allowing Jamus to get back to his feet and join her assault with more bolts of blue energy.

Carten roared and abandoned all pretense of defense, rushing into the thinning pack of hounds, smashing them with his shields and ignoring their attempts to penetrate his armor. He sent one flying with a kick, launching it directly into one of its fellows and sending both down in a pile. Mahria slumped down, exhausted, but Jamus was now blasting away with both hands, each shot finding its target and taking down hound after hound. He no longer needed to keep the hounds at bay with his whips due to their reduced numbers.

The last hound died with a crunch, its skull crushed by Carten's stomping boot as he roared in triumph. He was panting and covered in blood. Most of it was the blackish blood of the hounds but there was some red in there as well, showing that at least one of the hounds had made it past his armor. Mahria looked like she was about to pass out and Jamus was swaying on his feet, looking little better.

Rain looked for Lavarro, then did a double take. She hadn't moved, yet there was a veritable wall of dead dark hounds before her, their bodies twisted unnaturally. There was no blood, and she didn't look the slightest bit strained from the effort.

Well that is fucking terrifying. Glad she is on our side.

16: Cleanup

“Thirty minutes,” Lavarro said, then walked to the side of the chamber and sat against a wall to wait for the others to recover. Mahria looked pale, slumped against her slowly melting wall of ice.

“You ok?” Rain asked, slightly concerned. She really didn't look good.

“Fine. Used too much mana. Stop yelling.”

Rather than replying that he wasn't, in fact, yelling, Rain left her alone, respecting that she probably had a headache from the mana use. *Huh, it doesn't seem to hurt me that badly when I am empty. Maybe it hurts more if you have more mana? Well, my winter aura should help her, at least.*

Seeing Carten limping over to join them, Rain hurriedly activated purify. The man was absolutely coated in the black, sticky blood of the beasts. The dark blood seemed to resist his purification aura, but slowly the mess evaporated, steam rising from the piles of corpses on the ground as they too started to dry out. His aura reached far enough now to catch the entire chamber, but progress was slow in dissolving the corpses of the dark hounds.

By the time he had run out of mana, the blood was gone and the corpses looked like they were partially mummified. They were starting to turn gray and losing their dark, matted hair. Carten had removed one of his greaves and was bandaging his leg. Jamus had taken a seat next to Mahria, also looking a bit worse for wear. He was leaning his head against the ice wall, having removed his hat. *Wow, yeah, that looks like it is way worse than it gets for me. Wait, I don't have a headache right now, but my mana is empty. Huh.*

Rain sat, watching the others as his mana rapidly regenerated under the combined effect of Lavarro's potion and his own natural regeneration. He had switched back to winter, but the effect for the others was probably too small for them to notice. *I need to level this up pronto. I don't think I could have helped in that fight, even if I had one of those tier 1 offense auras. I feel so useless, I can't even help them recover. I wonder how much mana they used?*

“Jamus,” Rain whispered, causing the man to groan and lift his head off the ice to look at him.

“How much mana you use?” he asked.

“Too much,” he replied, and let his head fall back with a wet thump.

Mahria kicked Rain lightly in the knee, causing him to look at her. She was looking a bit better than Jamus, despite seeming worse at first. “Don't ask questions like that,” she said.

“Why?”

“It is <something>.”

“<Something>?” Rain asked. She kicked him again by way of reply.

Carten walked over, looking none the worse for wear after Rain's cleaning and having replaced his grievance. "Level, class, health, mana, skills. People do not like questions," he supplied.

"Oh. Sorry," Rain apologized. I guess it is taboo or something. I guess I can see that, like asking someone their weight. Kinda rude. Explains why nobody in the guild answered me when I asked before. I thought they just didn't understand me.

Idly, Rain wondered what level his companions were as he scrolled through his notifications. He had barely gotten any experience for the kills, his contribution consistently listed as <1%. The dark hounds had been between level 3 and 6, and there were more of them listed in his log than he cared to count. Carten and Jamus had handled them without too much trouble. Even Mahria's ice bolts had done significant damage to them despite her being much younger than the others. Rain was feeling a bit inferior at the moment.

Oh, and Lavarro is on a totally different level. I really don't want to piss her off. That was insane. She didn't even move. What the hell was that spell? It just snapped their necks like it was nothing.

Rain shivered and settled back to wait for the others to recover.

"Up," Lavarro commanded, rising from her spot against the wall and collecting her downed torch, using it to light a fresh one. Carten gave the groaning Jamus a hand up, then turned towards one of the smaller tunnels leading from the hall, walking over to it and waiting for the others.

The team proceeded to reclaim a few more miner's picks from the side tunnels, bringing them back up to the main chamber and dumping them near the ice wall rather than bringing them all the way up to the surface. Soon, only the main tunnel that most of the hounds had come from was left, so Lavarro sent Carten and Mahria up to the surface to drop the collected picks off before they moved further into the mine. By Rain's count, they were up to nine out of the fifteen picks that they were supposed to find.

Rain's mana was full again, so while he waited for Carten and Mahria to return he activated purify, further stripping away at the piles of corpses. By the time he finished, most of them were merely grayish-black lumps of dust, having lost most of their shape, even the bones dissolving. This went for the corpses of the miners as well, their clothes lying in the piles of ash that their corpses had become.

Rain was trying not to think about it.

As he ran out of mana and switched back to winter, he noticed Jamus giving him a curious look. The man didn't say anything, though, simply grunting and climbing laboriously back to his feet as the others returned.

What was that about? Man, he still looks like death. Is his regeneration really that bad? Oh, wait, yeah, it probably is. If he doesn't have intrinsic clarity... hell, even if he does, he still probably isn't a dynamo. That seems pretty unlikely for anyone other than an idiot like me. I guess he noticed how much mana I have been using. I haven't exactly been hiding it.

Seeing that the others weren't waiting for him to finish his internal monologue, Rain hustled to rejoin the group as they started down the steeply sloping tunnel. After fifteen minutes of cautious walking without so much as a side passage, the circle of torchlight revealed a pile of uncleared rubble and more dead miners. Instead of blocking the tunnel, however, the rubble was strewn around a hole into another dark, open space. Lavarro held up a hand, halting the group. She then tossed her torch into the hole, revealing that the miners had broken through into some sort of underground ruin.

On the other side of the hole was a tunnel of dark, square stones mortared together to form a hallway leading off into the darkness. Carten had taken up station near the gap and was peering into the tunnel warily.

This must be where the hounds came from. The miners broke through and the hounds came out and killed them all. What the hell is a ruin like this doing down here? And how was there anything alive in it?

Rain inspected the scene more closely, then corrected his assessment. The miners hadn't broken through into the ruin, the hounds had broken into the mine. The rubble was strewn on this side of the hole, as if something had smashed its way through, causing the wall to collapse into the tunnel. He saw a hand sticking out of the rubble, the unfortunate miner having been killed by the collapsing stone.

He saw a few picks lying around and started moving to pick them up, collecting five of them into a pile a little way up the tunnel. On a hunch, Rain pictured a miner's pick and activated his new detection aura, extending it to cover as much area as he could. In addition to the fuzzy signals coming from the pile behind him, he also felt one coming from the corner of the tunnel where the rocks were piled the deepest. He couldn't get a fix on it, so he tried applying amplify to the detection aura. It seemed to help a bit in resolving the feeling of the pick. He walked over to where he felt it to be and started digging.

Luckily, it wasn't buried very deep. Rain triumphantly held it aloft as he deactivated his detection aura. Mahria, who had been digging at the rubble on the other side of the tunnel, huffed at him. She said a word he didn't know, then straightened, brushing at her knees.

"Jamus, what is this place?" Mahria asked the man as she stepped next to Carten peering into the tunnel.

He waved her away, holding his head. "Dangerous. Let's go back."

The group carried the picks back up the tunnel, moving a bit more quickly now that they had explored the passage before them. Rain was panting from the grade of the tunnel and the weight of the three picks he was carrying by the time they reached the room where the battle had taken place. The ice wall was still largely unmelted and Lavarro charitably allowed him a short rest.

Looking around the room, Rain decided that the others could think what they wanted about his mana use, and let off another blast of purification. He hated to see a job left half done and it looked like one more round would take care of the remains of the dark hounds completely. As the piles dissolved, Rain noticed a glint of light shining in the wavering torchlight. Stooping, he brushed aside the last of the ash from one of the piles, inhaling sharply as he saw that there were three Tel shining at the bottom of the pile.

Excitedly, he scooped them up and started scrounging around from pile to pile, sifting through the ashes and pulling out the shining crystals. The last of the ash disappeared before he finished collecting them, so he switched to detection, using the skill to guide him to the largest concentrations of the small crystals. He found that the signals seemed to merge into a single fuzzy ball when there were a bunch of Tel together. His companions' packs, for example, shone like the sun compared to the tiny pile of Tel he was building up in his hand.

He grabbed the last of them as his mana ran out, then looked up to see his companions watching him with amusement on their faces. Rain blushed a bit, then stood, having been crawling along the floor for the past few minutes. Lavarro walked up to him and extended her hand, palm open. Rain stepped back, closing his hand over his prize, but Lavarro stopped him with a glare.

"Give it," she said.

Shit. She said I could come, but I wouldn't get any of the reward. I'd be fine sharing, but that's not a sharing face she's making. This fucking sucks.

Not willing to make an issue of it with a woman who could probably crush his spine with a thought, Rain reluctantly handed over the small pile of Tel to her. Lavarro roughly divided the pile and gave each of the others a share, not including Rain.

Asshole. I worked hard for that. Maybe I can't fight these things, but you wouldn't have even found those Tel without me. You weren't about to go digging through all those corpses.

Carten gave him an apologetic look but didn't argue on his behalf. He picked up his shields and started towards the tunnel to the higher chamber. Lavarro cut off any further discussion by moving to follow the big man up the tunnel.

I know I agreed to not getting a share, but come on, way to make me feel like a part of the team, guys.

They made it back to the top of the mine without incident, loading up the cart with the picks and securing the door to the mine with the heavy drop bar. Though it was dark, Lavarro had them travel for a few hours down the path before calling a halt for the night. Rain didn't offer to help set up camp. He just curled up in the cart next to the pile of picks, once again feeling very alone.

17: Return

Two days later, Rain was sitting in his alcove in the bath, soaking his tired legs in the cool water and idly swiping through his menus. The return to the city had been uneventful, but Rain's mood was sour. It wasn't even the money that was the real issue for him; it was the unspoken message: you are not one of us.

Rationally, he knew that he had agreed to the terms before they had set out, but it still hurt. He had been getting along well with the group, but then there was the battle and his inability to fight had made him start to feel like baggage, just along for the ride. His purification aura had aided the group, but not in any way that mattered, not really. The Tel had been the nail in the coffin. Friends would have shared, business associates would stick to the contract.

As they had traveled back to the city, Rain had kept to himself, studying from his notebook and using his spells for practice. He wasn't feeling as at home with the group as he had before. He felt awkward around Mahria, and Jamus was slow to recover from his mana usage. The mage had just sat in the cart with his eyes closed for the entire first day, wincing at every bump.

When they had finally returned to the city, Rain hadn't even accompanied them to the guild to turn in the quest. He had stiffly said his goodbyes and had wandered the city, his feet eventually carrying him here. Jamus had looked like he wanted to say something but had stopped himself at a look from Lavarro.

He felt like he had finally made some real friends in this world, but then it just fell apart before his eyes. He didn't blame them, and he knew that he was taking it harder than he should. Rationally, he thought it might be a good idea to seek them out at the guild and ask to join the group formally. He thought he had a chance at convincing Jamus and Carten, and maybe even Mahria. Lavarro was another matter. Rationality aside, the perceived betrayal had hit him hard, sending his mind down a dark path that had led him here, alone and feeling sorry for himself.

Ok, no more of that.

Catching his thoughts spiraling down the familiar well of depression, Rain splashed some of the cold river water onto his face and re-focused on his status. While he hadn't found the sense of belonging that he craved, he had made some pretty good progress in other areas.

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 7

Experience: 3163/3320

Dynamo

| | |
|---------|-----|
| Health | 200 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 200 |

| | |
|-----------|----|
| Strength | 10 |
| Recovery | 10 |
| Endurance | 10 |
| Vigor | 10 |
| Focus | 10 |
| Clarity | 90 |

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Free Points | 0 |
|-------------|---|

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|---------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Health | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 372 /hr | 293 /hr | -8/hr 30% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Skills

Refrigerate (3/10) Exp: 194/400

22-25 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 15 mp/s

Extend Aura (5/10) Exp: 30/1100

Extend aura range by 5 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 200%

Purify (6/10) Exp: 829/1600

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 6 meters

Cost: 60 mp/min

Winter (2/10) Exp: 24/200

Multiply M.Regen by 120% for all entities

Range: 2 meters

Cost: 2 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (8/10) Exp: 1790/2900

Multiply base mana regeneration by 260%

Amplify Aura (5/10) Exp: 21/1100

Multiply aura intensity by 150%

Multiply aura mana cost by 200%

Detection (4/10) Exp: 265/1400

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 0.7 meters

Range: 4 meters

Cost: 4 mp/s

Free Skill Points: 1

Rain had been spending some time thinking about what he wanted for the future. He had decided against investing more in his offensive auras for now. He couldn't see a way to use them in a group, not being able to hold back or direct refrigerate in any way. He felt as if it should be possible, but whenever he tried to change the skill effect, it either did nothing or just canceled the aura completely.

Rather than stressing about it, Rain decided to focus on making himself useful by boosting his beneficial auras instead. The well auras in particular had caught his eye. They would allow him to

change mana to other resources: health to heal wounds, stamina to refresh warriors, and even mana to help other mages who hadn't invested into clarity like he had.

To get those, however, he needed to break through the wall that was the seasonal auras as he called them. Spring, summer, and winter. The low mana cost of winter was making it difficult for him to level the skill, though the regeneration effect was incredibly useful and he left the aura on pretty much 24/7, even maintaining it while he slept. The boosted regeneration wouldn't be as good for traditional mages, however, as most of the benefit he was reaping was coming from his high base clarity and the tripling effect of the dynamo class.

The effect of winter was even stronger now that it was level two, more than offsetting the increase to the base cost. Rain was actually happy about that as it meant that the skill could level faster, especially with amplify and extend multiplying the mana cost by four when used in conjunction.

Still too slow, and I want to level all three seasons, so I need to get it even higher. There is only one skill that I can take right now that will do that.

Flicking to the aura metamagic tree, Rain considered, then invested his free point into aura focus, seeing that he now satisfied the requirement of 5 ranks in both amplify aura and extend aura.

Aura Focus (1/10) Exp: 0/200
Focus on an aura to boost its output
Multiply aura intensity by 120%
Multiply aura range by 120%
Multiply aura mana cost by 120%
User loses all external senses while focusing

Base cost of winter is 2 per hour, times 2 from extend, times another 2 from amplify, and then 1.2x from focus gives 9.6 mana per hour. I'll need to level extend, amplify, and focus first, then that should let me get that up to a 27x multiplier. That should help quite a bit. Plus, I can use focus for other things, so it isn't like it is going to waste.

Rain almost activated purify with all of his buffs right then and there, but caught himself, remembering the rule about magic in the city. It was almost noon and the baths were quite busy. Rain clambered out of the alcove, toweling off and dressing himself in his dry clothes that he had left at the side of the pool. He was a bit embarrassed to be naked in public, but plenty of other swimmers were, so he played it cool and dressed as quickly as he could.

Grabbing up his pack, he made his way out of the baths and to the one place that he knew he could use any aura he wanted without drawing too much attention to himself. He walked to the bottom of the sewer stairs and looked around. There wasn't anyone in sight and the stairs hid him from the street, so he activated purify at full blast, extending the aura to its massive buffed range of 11 meters. He used amplify as well, watching as the pulses of light intensified, quickly scouring the stone and diffusing down through the flowing water. His mana was draining quickly so he wasted no time and activated aura focus.

The instant he did his vision quickly faded to black and his hearing cut out as if someone had pulled a bag over his head. Stranger still was the sudden lack of the damp feeling of the sewer air against his

skin, or even the weight of his body pressing his feet into the ground. He started to topple over, his proprioception, the only sense left to him, insufficient to counter his sudden lack of external stimulus.

He canceled all of his skills and stumbled, catching himself just before he toppled into the waterway.

“Woah,” he gasped, staggered at the loss of perception caused by the skill.

He looked around at his surroundings. The area covered by the aura was now larger than his ability to see in the dim torchlight of the sewer, but the area immediately surrounding him was spotless. He had cleaned it only a few days before, so this wasn't entirely unexpected. He'd have to find fresh filth to test the true effect of his layered skills.

He walked a little ways down the tunnel until he reached the end of the mostly clean area, then sat, ignoring the slime on the stone as it would be cleaned away momentarily. The seat of his pants might still be a bit wet, but that was much better than falling into the waterway.

Ok, let's get an fps reading on this. 5 seconds, I think.

Rain sat up straight, readying himself. He let loose with his maximized purification aura, counting the seconds once his senses dropped away, releasing the aura after 5 seconds had passed. His senses returned and he swayed slightly as his balance returned.

Inspecting the area around himself, he saw that the ground was mostly clean, but there were still some persistent stains. *Taking the layer of slime here as 1 filth, that was 5 seconds of aura, so 0.1 filth per second, maybe? I'll try another 5 seconds.*

Closing his eyes again, Rain repeated his effort. When he opened them, he smiled as he saw that the stones had been scoured clean. He watched with mild interest as the water flowing in the waterway faded back to brown, the clean water being swept away downstream and replaced by the gradual flow through the canal. Glancing at his mana, he saw that the effort had taken around a quarter of his total.

Getting to his feet, Rain paced out the distance along the waterway, finding the edge of the clean area and then walking past it for about the same distance. He then sat again and re-activated the skill for another ten seconds, watching as his mana ticked down. His vision might have faded to black, but his status overlay was working fine. After another ten seconds, his mana was down to half and he found himself sitting in another perfectly clean circle.

Humm, so just a little bit stronger with aura focus. Pretty much what I was expecting.

Still seated, Rain switched to his detection aura, focusing on the image of a slime and activating the skill, using all of his buffs to boost it, including aura focus. His senses faded, but he didn't feel any detections on his magical radar. He canceled it after a few seconds, switched his focus to Tel, and activated the aura again. His vision faded, but this time it was replaced with the immaterial sense of the Tel in his pocket. He was surprised to feel another signal coming from further down the tunnel. Canceling the skill and getting up, he walked slowly down the tunnel for a few meters, trying to remember how far the signal had been. Eventually, he spotted its gleam coming from a wide crack in the cleaned stone. He picked it up wonderingly.

What are you doing here? Did someone kill a slime and just leave it? Oh well, finders keepers.

Rain added the Tel to the others in his vial, then turned to head back up to the city, his mana getting a bit low. He didn't want to spend his whole day down here hunting slimes right now. Detection didn't have a visual effect, but it used plenty of mana and he felt that he would be safe enough using it to train aura focus from the comfort of the guild.

Rain was a bit hungry when he made it back to the street, having eaten his last ration bar for breakfast that morning. His offensive aura still might be a little weak, but his jaw was certainly getting stronger from all the exercise. He walked for a while, looking for a restaurant or an inn. He didn't find one, but he did see a man selling sausages wrapped in bread over in the merchant's square. He bought two, then decided to wander through the square while he ate.

There was a wide variety of things on display, but not really that much for adventurers beyond simple travel supplies. He did buy some beef jerky, figuring that it would keep and was softer than travel rations. It was cheaper too; guild rates seemed to be artificially inflated. Rain was about to leave the square when he suddenly stopped, then walked back to a stand he had just passed. He traded two whole Tel for a thick, woven blanket, which he rolled and tucked into his pack, almost filling it completely. His days on the road had given him his fill of sleeping on hard dirt with nothing to cover him.

The merchant had been giving him the stink eye when he paid with Tel, but Rain didn't care, smiling at his new acquisition. He was pretty sure he had paid more than he needed to as well, but he didn't have the motivation to haggle at the moment.

Rain's mana was almost full at this point, so he found a barrel in an alley and sat on it, activating maximized detection and searching for Tel. He got far fewer signals than he was expecting, just those of the Tel in his pocket, two coming from the direction of the merchant, and one or two more wandering through the crowd.

Switching his focus to the small copper coins, Rain was almost overwhelmed by the number of detections. He felt as if he was in the middle of a cloud, fuzzy copper signals coming from all sides, though stronger from the direction of the market square. He changed his focus again to the larger coins, feeling the fog around him shift slightly. It started to drop off when he switched to focusing on the copper tiles, then dropped much lower when he switched to the bars, with him able to pick out individual signals coming from various directions.

This quick scan had taken almost all of his mana, so Rain let the skill drop and pushed himself up off his barrel. *Like I thought, only adventurers use Tel. I should try searching for Tel around the guild to confirm. Looks like the small coins are commonplace, but the tiles and bars are less common. I should find a bank or something and get some copper to spend in the city.*

Rain wandered over towards the guild square, keeping an eye out for anything that looked like a bank, but not searching too hard. He didn't plan on spending any more copper right now, so it was a low priority. When he reached the guild square, he poked his head into the shop he had noticed before, then walked in to look around. As he suspected, the shop catered to adventurers. Various types of weaponry and armor lined the walls, and there were a few displays in the center of the shop with more ornate pieces on display.

There were a couple other adventurers browsing the wares. A man in a green tunic came up to him as he entered, greeting him and asking to see his plate. Rain fished it out from underneath his tunic and left it there, content to walk about with his guild status on display when he was this near to the guild.

The man in the tunic, some sort of uniform Rain supposed, nodded at his plate and asked him a question.

“Sorry, what? My speaking not good,” Rain replied, having missed the question.

“What are you looking for,” the man repeated, speaking slowly and clearly.

“I don't know. Weapon? Magic?” Rain asked, not really intending to buy anything, just fishing for information on what was available.

“Sword?” the man asked, eyeing Rain's workman's clothes and apparently deciding that he was some type of warrior. Rain shrugged, deciding to just go with the flow. The man drew him over to a wall of swords, taking a blade down and handing it to him. Rain took the sword, noting that it was much lighter than he had been expecting. It seemed to be just a basic longsword, with an unornamented guard and nothing about it to indicate that it was magical in any way.

“Magic?” Rain asked, inspecting the blade. The man nodded saying a word Rain didn't know.

“I don't know that word,” Rain replied with one of the most useful phrases he had learned so far. The man held up a hand, motioning Rain to wait, then walked behind a counter, returning with a scrap of leather. He handed it to Rain, taking the sword back.

“Try your knife,” the man said.

Rain did so, finding that he could cut through the leather scrap, but he had to saw at it to get through the tough material. The man stopped him with a wave, then handed him the sword again. “Try the sword.”

Rain ran the leather along the blade, marveling as it sliced through it with no resistance. It was beyond sharp, like a razor despite the mundane appearance of the blade.

Oh cool, so it is enchanted to be sharper.

“How much?” Rain asked, wondering at the price for the blade.

The man seemed to consider, then replied “Two Gran-Tel.”

“Gran-Tel?” Rain asked. “What is gran?”

The man took the sword back from him coolly and replaced it on the wall. He seemed to be annoyed with Rain for some reason, so Rain apologized, using his favorite phrase again.

“Sorry, I don't know that word.”

The man sighed and explained with his hands that a 'Gran-Tel' was a larger crystal than a normal Tel, and that the exchange rate between Tel and Gran-Tel was 1000:1.

Rain's eyes popped at the value of the sword he had been holding. *That thing is the price of a car!*

“Too many Tel for me, sorry. What is fewest Tel magic item?”

The man sighed, then led Rain over to the counter and gestured at a box of grayish metal rings.
“Statrings, 10 Tel, 2 for 15.”

It took Rain a few moments to parse out the run-together word the man had used. *Stat Rings?*

Rain looked closely at the rings. They were jumbled haphazardly in the wooden box, not displayed neatly. The rings seemed to be made of iron, and were uniform in shape, if a bit rough. Each ring was inscribed with a small, crudely drawn symbol. Rain recognized them as the symbols for the primary attributes that he'd learned from Jamus. The common script represented each of the attributes such as strength and focus with a single symbol. Health, mana, and stamina also had unique symbols, but he didn't see any rings marked with them.

Taking a ring with the symbol for strength, he looked at the attendant questioninglly. “What does it do?”

“That one? Strength. Try it.”

Rain slipped the ring on, but he didn't feel any different. The ring was a bit loose on his ring finger, and he was about to transfer it to his middle finger when he noticed that his health bar was showing half full. *Oooh, I get it. Attributes.*

Pulling up his attributes screen, Rain saw that his strength was showing as 20. He removed the ring and watched as it dropped back to 10, his health bar instantly re-filling. Replacing the ring, he watched his strength and health jump back up again.

I don't feel stronger. I also don't feel like I am half dead, but my health is at 50% with this on. Weird.

He removed the ring and placed it back in the box, selecting one marked with the focus symbol. Trying it on, he watched as his focus increased by 10. He slipped on a few more, one for each of the fingers on his left hand. It didn't seem like there was any conflict, each ring boosting a stat by ten. Even wearing two of the same type didn't seem to cause an issue, the boost just adding to +20. Wearing two rings on a single finger didn't work, though; only the first boost seemed to take effect. Slipping off all of the rings and laying them out on the counter, Rain considered.

I have 23 Tel, and I could get two of these for 15. That seems like a pretty good deal to me. I can make that back in a day if I get a good quest. Compared to the sword, that is nothing. 20 free stat points! Humm, do I go for clarity? I get triple bang for my buck that way, but it is really just a drop in the bucket compared to how much mana regen I want. Maybe some strength so I have a bit more health? Or Vigor so I can recover fully after a full day of walking?

Rain stood, considering as the shop attendant tapped his foot impatiently. Eventually, he made his choice, fishing out a number of rings with the symbols for focus and strength stamped into them. He returned the rest to the box, then tried on the rings one at a time until he found one of each type that fit

decently well. He picked up the remaining rings and tossed them back into the box, not being too careful with them. They were made of iron after all, and the box seemed to be this store's equivalent of the candy display at the checkout of a supermarket.

“These two,” Rain said, fishing out his vial and counting out 15 Tel onto the counter. The man picked up one of the Tel and squinted at it before nodding and sweeping the rest into a pouch.

“Thank you,” Rain said. The man snorted and walked off to help another customer, though Rain noticed he was still watching him from the corner of his eye.

Wow, that was a bit rude, though I suppose I'd be a bit annoyed too if someone came into my luxury car dealership and spent ten minutes picking out an air freshener. I forgive you, random shop guy. I'll be back later with more Tel.

Rain transferred the rings between his fingers, settling on his left middle finger and right ring finger as having the best fit. He looked at his vitals as he left the shop, smiling as he saw that health and mana were both showing as half full.

Doubled my mana and health pools! I can use my skills for twice as long now, and I'll still be full when I wake up in the morning. Oh, and refrigerate is probably a bit stronger too because of that (fcs) next to the effect. Let's see.

Rain walked out of the flow of traffic and pulled up his skills menu. He was a bit disappointed that the power of Refrigerate hadn't doubled. The menu listed it as 23-26 cold damage. He found that he could focus on the number to bring up the base value of 22-25. That confirmed what he had seen before about the damage scaling of the skill.

Oh well. It is something at least. I can use it for twice as long, that is the real takeaway here. Man, I want more of these rings. I need a quest.

Rain wandered over to the guild and walked in. He saw Gus over behind his counter and waved to him, getting a double take in response, then a hasty wave back. *Hah, guess I should have told him where I was going, not that I really knew.* Walking to the board, he looked it over. This late in the day, it was pretty picked over. He recognized a few postings that had been there since he had set out almost a week ago, including the one for the slime near the middle of the board. *I guess nobody wants to fight a giant slime. Can't imagine why.* Seeing that there was nothing available for his level, Rain decided to implement plan B.

He walked over to Gus, who was manning one of the counters though there wasn't a line at any of them at the moment.

“Hi Gus, I am back.”

“Rain. Thought you were dead.”

“Yeah, sorry, I should have goodbye.”

“Your language is better. Still bad, but better.”

“Thank you,” Rain said. “I am much practice.”

Gus cocked his head at this. “What?”

“I am practice much? Much practicing?”

“Your <something> needs work.”

“Yes,” Rain agreed. “Me try make words good.”

Gus just shook his head at this, chuckling. “Do you need something?”

“Yes. I need Tel. There are no quests I can do, how get money?” Rain asked, using the general term for wealth, not caring if it came in the form of Tel or in copper.

“I am not giving you a <something>.”

“No, no, not... I want...find Tel, not...get from you for nothing.”

“Kill monsters, get money. Adventurer <something>.”

Rain smiled at the saying, feeling like it was a fitting motto for the type of people he had met in the guild so far.

“Ok, where.”

“In the forest, or in a <something>, but that is dangerous.”

“Dangerous like slime?”

“Slimes are not dangerous. Slimes are <something>. The forest is dangerous if you are alone. <Somethings> are very dangerous, always.”

“<Somethings?>”

Gus shook his head and sighed. “<Somethings>. Monsters come from <Somethings>, they are <something>, and they <something>.”

“Sorry, I don't know that word.”

“Below the sewer. Very below. <Something>,” Gus replied, repeating the word again, annoyed.

I'll go with lair until I learn better. That seems close enough. Monsters come from lairs, and there is one under the sewer. I guess that explains the slimes, and maybe the dark hounds too. The miners, they delved too greedily and too deep.

“Under sewer where?”

“Don't. You will die.”

Shit, he is probably right about that. Note to self, do not go too deep in the sewers.

“How make money without kill monsters? Without lair?”

“Quests. Or get a job.”

“Job?” Rain repeated the word, unsure if he was remembering the meaning correctly from his lessons from Jamus.

“I work...for guild? Like you?”

“No, the guild does not have any jobs <something>.”

“No? I can help. Clean guild. Purify. I clean, you give me Tel?”

Gus seemed to consider this. He then called over the old man who was manning the other counter, the two of them having a quick conversation too fast for Rain to follow. The old man nodded, then looked at Rain.

“Show me,” the old man said.

Rain signaled him to wait, then walked to the center of the guild. Seeing that he had the old man's attention, he activated purify and extended it to maximum range. The white light spread out through the room causing a few startled yelps, but the clamor died down as those familiar with Rain's aura explained the effect to everyone else. Rain watched as the light rebounded against the walls of the room and spilled over into the hallways. He gave it a good ten seconds, then canceled the effect, figuring that it should be more than enough.

The old man and Gus walked over to him, the old man crouching to run a finger along the floorboards. Seeing it come up clean, he considered, then turned to Rain. “The guild has no jobs.”

Rain's face fell at this but the old man held up a hand to forestall him.

“But, if you clean the <something> guild hall every day, you can use the bunk room for free.” There was a bit of an angry uproar in the room at this; the group had attracted a fair audience at this point.

Seems like that is a rare thing. Everyone with a copper plate looks pretty miffed. Silver plate dude in the back doesn't seem to care though.

“Yes,” Rain said, sticking out his hand for the old man to shake. The man took his hand in a surprisingly strong grip and shook it firmly, then turned to go back to his desk.

“Hey, I am Rain, what is your name?” Rain said, before the man got too far away.

“Rankin,” the old man replied, nodding to him, then returning to work.

Gus clapped Rain on the shoulder as he walked past him back towards his counter. “Start with the training room. Someone bled all over the floor.”

Rain sat on his blanket near the fountain in the guild square. The sun was going down, but the square was still fairly busy with both adventurers and normal townsfolk. He had camped out here after having finished cleaning the guild, inspired by his deal with Rankin to see if he could make a bit more money from his aura.

Looking at his mana, Rain stood, causing the few figures waiting near the fountain to perk up and look at him expectantly. Grinning, Rain hopped up on the edge of the fountain and spread his arms, activating purify at maximum range and intensity. There were a few startled shouts from some of the townspeople as the glowing white light washed over them, but the calm reactions of the adventurers kept them from panicking. A good portion of the people in the square were already familiar with him, having seen him use the aura in the guild at one point or another. He gave it ten seconds, then hopped down, returning to his seat on his blanket.

Next to him, he had a sign labeled with the word 'donations' and a hat that he had borrowed from Gus. A few townsfolk came up and dropped some copper coins into the hat to join those already there. The first time he had tried this little stunt, he had gotten a much worse response. Now, though, word seemed to have spread and a few people had come to the square specifically to see what all the fuss was about.

Rain smiled as he thanked a man who had dropped a large copper coin into the hat.

He had hatched the idea while having dinner in the tavern after finishing cleaning the guild. A few large flagons of Khurt's beer had gone a long way to get over his reservations about displaying his aura in public. Purify apparently didn't work on alcohol, for all that it was technically poison. It did work on his bladder, though, allowing him to stay in the bar for longer than he probably should have.

To make sure that he wouldn't get in trouble for using magic in the square, he had floated the idea past Gus before deciding to try it. Begging was prohibited in the city, but busking was allowed provided that it wasn't dangerous to the people or the infrastructure. It wasn't even all that uncommon; however, most buskers were musicians and other street performers, not mages. Gus had also told Rain that he was an idiot, but Rain hadn't cared about that, drunk as he was. He needed money if he wanted more of those stat rings.

He had been a bit uncomfortable the first time he had tried it, given what Jamus had told him about the Watch. They didn't patrol the guild square, however, and the spell was completely harmless, so Rain had decided that it would probably be fine. His gamble seemed to have paid off, most people being pretty appreciative of the effect of the aura once they figured it out.

The sun had well and truly set now, so Rain took down his sign and pulled in the hat to count the coins. His busking had earned him almost five Tel's worth of assorted copper coinage. Rain was smiling as he returned to the guild, blanket under his arm, pleased at how lucrative the activity had turned out to be. Gus wasn't there, so he left his hat on his desk and made his way to the bunk. He was beat from the long days of walking and the beer he had drunk hadn't done his energy level any favors.

Kicking off his boots and tucking his pack under the bed, he called it a day and laid down to sleep.

18: Rescue

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Stamina Use: 35

Mana Use: 2416

[Level Up]

Skill Experience Earned

Extend Aura: 286

Purify: 528

Winter: 92

Amplify Aura: 286

Detection: 1200 [Rank Up]

Aura Focus: 24

Intrinsic Clarity: 2416 [Rank Up]

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 8

Experience: 2294/4118

Dynamo

| | |
|---------|-----|
| Health | 400 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 400 |

| | |
|-----------|---------|
| Strength | 20 [10] |
| Recovery | 10 |
| Endurance | 10 |
| Vigor | 10 |
| Focus | 20 [10] |
| Clarity | 100 |

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Free Points | 0 |
|-------------|---|

Statistics

| | Total | Base | Modifier |
|---------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Health | 400 | 400 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 400 | 400 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 447 /hr | 350 /hr | -8/hr 30% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

Resistances

| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Skills

Refrigerate (3/10) Exp: 194/400

23-26 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 15 mp/s

Extend Aura (5/10) Exp: 316/1100

Extend aura range by 5 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 200%

Purify (6/10) Exp: 1357/1600

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 6 meters

Cost: 60 mp/min

Winter (2/10) Exp: 116/200

Multiply M.Regen by 120% for all entities

Range: 2 meters

Cost: 2 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (9/10) Exp: 1306/3700

Multiply base mana regeneration by 280%

Amplify Aura (5/10) Exp: 307/1100

Multiply aura intensity by 150%

Multiply aura mana cost by 200%

Detection (5/10) Exp: 65/2200

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 0.6 meters

Range: 5 meters

Cost: 5 mp/s

Aura Focus (1/10) Exp: 24/200

Focus on an aura to boost its output

Multiply aura intensity by 120%

Multiply aura range by 120%

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

User loses all external senses while focusing

Free Skill Points: 1

Rain was sitting in the guild tavern trying to decide what to do with his skill point. He already had his plan for the day all set out. He was just finishing his breakfast of eggs and bacon as he flicked through his menus, looking at skills and trying to decide where to invest his last point.

Velocity is tempting, but I kinda want to save this point in case I need something later. I guess I can just leave it free for now. It isn't like I don't have enough skills to practice. What happens when a skill gets to 10, I wonder?

Rain closed out his menus and waved to Khurt as he got up to leave, starting to take his plate over to the counter. Khurt stopped him with a hand and told him to just leave it on the table, thanking him again for cleaning his kitchen the night before. He'd made Rain breakfast for free as a reward for the spotless workspace he had found waiting for him when he opened up the tavern that morning. Gus had apparently explained the arrangement between Rain and Rankin about free lodging to all of the guild employees, but Khurt was so happy with the results that he had thrown in a free breakfast as a special, one-time, personal thank you.

Rain thanked Khurt again for the meal and left the guild, trading his pack for a large basket of torches on his way out. When he had gone to the quest hall earlier that morning, Gus had flagged him down and pushed a quest slip into his hands. The man had seemed a little on edge as he had explained the quest to Rain. Gus had been sweating, so Rain had decided to help him out with the request instead of exploring the city as he had planned. The reward helped with his decision as well, and Rain had accepted the quest to Gus's relief.

Ten Tel, just for changing out the dead torches in the sewer? Is it really so important that it had Gus on edge like that? Maybe he couldn't get anyone to take it? There must have been more to it, it felt like he wanted me out of the guild for some reason. He almost choked when I told him I was going to have breakfast first. What is going to happen in the guild today, and why doesn't Gus want me there? He didn't even let me ask; he just ran off as soon as I promised I would leave after I ate.

Rain turned upstream when he reached the bottom of the sewer stairs and started to jog along the flowing water. He was being a little careful with his footing in the dim light, but nothing like his former, slow exploration. He knew this section of the tunnel, and he really couldn't bring himself to be cautious about slimes after the encounter with the dark hounds. The basket of torches had straps to carry it on his back and it was weighing him down quite a bit, but it was manageable.

“Jog jog jog, I hate jogging, this is my jogging song,” Rain huffed and puffed as he moved down the tunnel, making noise deliberately to attract slimes. He wasn't sure if they had a sense of hearing at all, but there was no harm in it, so he decided to humor himself and make the attempt. He was really feeling out of shape. All the walking he had been doing had convinced him to try to make an effort to improve his fitness a bit so he wasn't so sore and tired when he went to bed every night.

No cars in this world, and no subway, so my own two legs better be up to it. Fuck I hate jogging.

Rain pulled to a stop as he heard the sound of a slime detaching from the ceiling and plopping to the ground behind him. He had run right under it, too fast for it to land on him. Grinning, he spun and activated refrigerate. The slime died before it had a chance to recover from its fall, large chunks of it freezing and tearing its outer membrane apart. Rain canceled his aura before it froze solid and sat, disregarding the growing puddle creeping towards him. He activated purify with aura focus, the smell of the slime vanishing along with his other senses.

Get wrecked, slime.

He gave it a good 20 seconds before he canceled his aura and opened his eyes. The tunnel was spotless, no sign of the battle remaining other than a single Tel shining from where it lay near the edge of the waterway. Rain smiled, climbing to his feet and collecting it, adding it to his supply.

Mana isn't even below three quarters. The focus ring was the right choice!

Dusting off the knees of his leather pants unnecessarily, Rain resumed jogging down the tunnel, singing his jogging song. Killing the slime had been easy, trivial even.

I can do this all day! Ok, maybe not. Gah, my knees. Fuck jogging.

Rain continued down the tunnel in this manner, occasionally using detection to look for slimes and Tel whenever his mana got near full. He didn't find any before he reached the tunnel that he had helped to unclog before. Pausing to rest, Rain listened for any sound of slimes but heard nothing.

Carefully, he stepped down into the ankle-deep flow of water in the side tunnel, crossed it, and climbed up the far side of the channel. He used purify to clean off his shoes, relieved that his boots were water-tight enough to keep his socks dry.

He set a slower pace as he continued down the tunnel, partly out of caution at the unfamiliar section of the waterway, but mostly because he was out of breath from the exercise. He lit a torch from one burning on the wall, seeing that there were no more spots of light off in the distance.

Time to get to work.

Rain looked for sconces on the wall as he walked. He swapped out the exhausted torches with fresh ones as he found them, lighting each one before moving on as the request had indicated. While he was working, Rain was interrupted by a group of three more slimes that had squirmed their way up out of the waterway behind him. He dispatched them easily, though only one of them dropped a Tel. Over the course of the morning, he found several more groups of slimes as he continued replacing torches.

That last group brings it up to fifteen slimes in total today. These things are everywhere around here. They must like the dark sections more than the torchlight. Maybe that is what this quest is for? Light the torches to keep the slimes away?

Rain came to a halt as he reached a large intersection in the waterway. He only had one torch left, the burning one he was holding. Relieved to be done, he swapped it for a dead one on the side of the tunnel and threw the burned out torch into the basket. He hunkered down, waiting for his mana to regenerate.

By his reckoning, he should be somewhere near the center of the city. He had passed several more side passages feeding into the main waterway, some carrying filthy water and other things into the channel to be swept out of the city.

There must be a system of pipes from the river to keep all this flowing. I'm impressed. This must have been hell to build without an excavator.

Just as he was about to start heading back, he was startled by a brilliant flash of white light from down the left branch of the intersection. Listening hard, he thought he could hear a man yelling. The sound was muffled, and came echoing along the stone arch of the tunnel. Another flash of light brightened the darkness and in its light Rain saw that the tunnel was blocked by a dark mass of some sort.

Shit, there is someone down here. Sounds like they are fighting.

Rain grabbed the burning torch back from the wall and clambered up the ledge into the side tunnel, the basket of spent torches forgotten. He could hear the man's shouting more clearly as he approached, along with the sound of splashing and a slurping, sucking sound. Rain quickened his pace, his torchlight revealing the blockage to be a wall of slime holding together sticks, dead leaves, and other detritus. It filled the tunnel completely on his side. The water in the channel was flowing through a gap at the top of the barrier on the other side of the tunnel. It splashed down onto the far walkway before flowing back into the channel. The shouting could be heard coming from the gap in the barrier, along with intermittent flashes of white light.

"Hey! Are you OK?!" Rain shouted, studying the barrier and trying to think of a way through it.

"Hey! Where are you! I can't... Gah, damn thing, die already!" came the voice from the other side of the wall, followed by another flash of light.

Rain activated purify at maximum strength, not using aura focus as he needed to be able to see. He threw his torch to the ground to dig at the slime with both hands, pulling free branches and clumps of filth and hurling them away. His aura was helping quite a bit, loosening the slime and letting him break

it up with his hands. Soon, the barrier started to give. The force of the water was breaking through it and rapidly widening the gap.

“Fuck! Should have thought this through!”

Rain grabbed for an empty iron torch sconce as the barrier gave way completely, the water rushing into the tunnel. The flow extinguished his torch as bits of the barrier broke off and were carried down the tunnel.

Rain hung on desperately as the water tried to tear him from the wall. As he yelled in the darkness, something heavy crashed into him, breaking his grip and knocking him over and into the waterway. He clung to the object, identifying it as a person as they both were swept rapidly down the tunnel. The water was overflowing the banks of the channel and giving him no way to get back to his feet. Rain pushed the man away and fought to keep his head above water as he was swept back towards the intersection. The flow washed him straight over the small ledge and into the larger channel in a wave of fetid water.

Rain swam hard to get out into calmer water, spluttering and choking as his feet found purchase on the bottom of the channel. He was able to push himself to his feet once he got out from under the waterfall pouring into the intersection.

A glowing white light was coming towards him down the passage rapidly. The man had summoned some sort of light and Rain grabbed for him as he was swept over the waterfall. He caught him before he could be swept away and yanked at the fabric of the man's clothes, dragging him out into the calmer water. The light was coming from a glowing ball hovering around the man's head. Rain heaved, throwing the man's torso up onto the dry ledge of the walkway, then levered himself up and out of the channel. He grabbed the man's arms and pulled him out of the flowing water as the man coughed and spluttered.

Rain panted, watching as the flow into the intersection continued unabated. Abruptly, the water cut off, the flow rapidly dwindling to nothing.

Something blocked the passage again.

Rain retched and fought not to vomit, re-activating purify as he coughed and tried to clear his throat of the foul water. The skill quickly removed the horrible taste from the back of his mouth, but he left it running. The light from the orb flickered worryingly and Rain looked down at the man he'd pulled from the water. He had rolled over on to his back and was coughing weakly. There was a line of blood running down his face from a large gash on his forehead. The man's eyes rolled back in his head and the orb of light winked out of existence.

Rain cursed and moved over to the man, trying to see if he was breathing by the faint glow of purify. He was relieved to see that the man seemed to be just unconscious, his chest rising and falling weakly. Rain pressed his hands to the wound on the man's head, trying to stem the flow of blood while not jostling him too much. The cut didn't seem to be too bad; it was bleeding a lot, but it didn't seem life-threatening.

Shit, he must have bashed his head against the side of the channel. I hope he wakes up, I don't know how to treat a concussion. I really need a healing skill.

Slowly, the flow of the blood stopped, and the man's eyes flickered. Rain slumped back in relief, letting purify drop and plunging them back into darkness. The man groaned and shifted, trying to sit up.

"Hey, careful!" Rain said, reaching out and pressing the man back down, trying to keep him from falling back into the waterway.

"Aaah, who..." the man managed, clearly disoriented and in quite a bit of pain.

"It is ok. Stay still."

The man fought him for a moment, then relaxed, slumping back to rest his head against the floor.

"Oww," he said, weakly.

The two stayed like that for a few minutes as the adrenaline drained from Rain's system to be replaced by exhaustion and pain. He had acquired quite a number of bruises, and he was freezing from the icy water saturating his clothes. Purify had taken care of the mess, but it did nothing for the moisture.

Fucking hell, feels like I was flushed down a toilet, ugh.

Rain leaned in as he heard the man struggle to speak. "What?"

"...thank..you," the man managed, weakly.

"Any time," Rain replied, smiling in relief.

The injured man coughed out a weak laugh. Suddenly there was light as the orb returned to float around the man's head.

Rain watched as he slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position, wincing and holding his hand to his head as he inspected the damage.

“Are you ok?” Rain asked again, concerned.

“No,” the man replied, wincing, “I <something> to <something>.”

“Sorry, I don't know that word,” Rain said.

Damn language. At least if he is using sentences, he is probably fine.

“What?” the man asked.

“My language is not good. Sorry,” Rain replied.

“Oh. Well <something>, I <something>. Thank you,” the man said, scooting over to the wall and leaning against it to rest with his eyes closed.

Rain joined him, watching him carefully in case he passed out again. The man had dark skin with long, straight black hair tied back in a ponytail. He looked to be about Rain's own age and his black robe was sodden from the water. He was clearly a mage of some sort if the glowing orb of light wasn't enough of a clue. There was a bronze adventurer's plate hanging from around his neck.

“Hello, my name is Rain,” Rain said, offering the man his hand.

The man took his hand and shook it, “Val,” he replied, then let his hand fall back to his side with a wet thump.

Rain paused to catch his breath at the top of the stairs, worn out from having hauled a semi-lucid Val all the way back to the entrance. The man could barely walk and Rain was already tired from the morning's exertion. Not knowing where else to bring him, Rain started towing Val towards the guild, their steps slow and plodding, both of them at their limits.

They had made it about halfway there when Rain suddenly felt the burden of the wounded man lessen. Looking up, he saw that a man wearing a boiled leather jacket had come up to the struggling pair and draped Val's other hand over his shoulder, supporting half of his weight.

He smiled as he saw Rain looking at him. "Where to?"

"Guild," Rain managed. "Thank you."

The three of them set off, Val barely managing to keep his feet moving at this point. They made better time with the stranger's assistance, reaching the guild after a few minutes of walking. Rain turned to thank the man as he steadied Val on the steps of the guild, but to his surprise, he was gone. Rain searched the guild square with his eyes, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

What the? Where did he go? I didn't even get to thank him...

Val groaned, and Rain put the mystery out of his mind, pushing open the door to the guild hall and guiding the bedraggled man inside.

"Help!" Rain called out, causing a bit of a stir in the quest hall. A few people rushed over to their aid, helping the pair over to one of the benches. He guided Val down, then collapsed right next to him, his stamina totally spent. Rain saw one of the guild attendants disappear down a hallway as he was assaulted by a barrage of questions. He didn't answer, feebly waving them away and looking concernedly at Val, who had passed out again.

Soon, a man Rain didn't know appeared wearing Guild blue. He placed his hand against Val's head, giving a displeased grunt before repeating the motion on Rain. As he did so, Rain felt a pulse of foreign mana invade his body and sweep through it before returning to the man's hand.

What was that?

"What happened?" The man asked, staring at Rain.

"Sewers. I found him. We fell in the water. He hit his head."

The man gave Rain a skeptical look. "Fell in the water? I don't think so. What did you do?" The man was fingering Rain's collar, which was of course clean. The fabric had even dried out during the slow journey back through the tunnels.

“Wallace, it’s fine. He is the one I told you about. The one who cleaned the Guild.”

Rain was relieved to hear Gus's voice as the portly man joined the circle of people surrounding them.

“Humph,” Wallace said. “OK, fine, I <something> you. Healing is 20 Tel, stamina restoration is 10. Cough up.”

Hurriedly, Rain reached into his pocket for his vial of Tel. He knew he had enough to pay for healing after defeating the slimes. Not finding the vial, he checked his other pocket, then panicked, finding only the quest slip and nothing else.

Someone stole my money! I had it, I'm sure! It was still there after I got out of the water. I checked.

Rain slid off the bench to search the ground, hoping that he had dropped it somehow. The floor was bare, with no sign of the vial anywhere.

“No money, no healing,” the man called Wallace said impatiently. “Well?”

Rain pulled out his quest slip and threw it at the man, turning to check the pockets of Val's robe.

“What is this? A quest?” Wallace asked, handing the slip to Gus.

“Worth 10 Tel,” Gus informed him.

“Not enough for healing. You want stamina, boy?”

“No! Val needs...! He ... He can die!” Rain insisted, pointing at Val's limp form.

Fuck! His brain is probably swelling or something. Isn't that what happens with concussions?

“He won't die,” grouched Wallace, turning away with a harrumph and disappearing into the crowd.

Dude! What the actual fuck?

Gus placed a hand on Rain's shoulder, steadying him.

“Don't worry. I will get him a bunk. Wallace <something> him, it will be ok. You and you, come on.”

Gus called out two of the gathered observers, directing them to lift Val. He started leading them toward the bunk room. Rain climbed painfully to his feet and followed the pair carrying Val's limp form.

“In there.” Gus stopped Rain and pointed him to one of the consultation rooms as the two adventurers maneuvered Val into the bunk room. Gus left them to it and followed Rain in, closing the door behind him. Rain slumped into a chair, the fight having gone out of him.

Taking a seat across the oval table from him, Gus gave Rain a level look. He waited for Rain's breathing to steady out, then spoke.

“What happened?”

“He was fighting... something. I... the sewer was... the water...” Rain searched for the words he needed, failing to find them as he tried to explain the situation. “Stopped!” he blurted, seizing on the word as it came to him. “The water was stopped by a... thing. I... broke the thing. Water came out and... we fall in. Val hit his head. I carry him here.”

“What was he fighting?”

“I don't know. Dark.”

“OK. Wait here,” Gus said, getting up and leaving Rain alone in the room.

Gus said he would be ok, and so did that guy Wallace. They wouldn't just let someone die, right? Charging for healing? What the hell is that? Do I need to buy fucking insurance now?

Gus returned to the room, hurriedly shutting the door behind him. He had a worried expression on his face as Rain looked up at him.

“Rain, the Guild <something> is here,” Gus hissed in an urgent whisper. “Don't tell him anything about-”

Gus was cut off as the door to the room slammed open violently, rebounding off the wall. A huge man wearing blue enameled plate armor was standing in the doorway. He had the symbol of the guild

embossed in the center of his breastplate in gold, as well as a golden adventurer's plate hanging around his neck. His rugged face seemed strangely familiar for some reason.

“Is this the one? Gus. Move,” the man spoke and Gus leaped to obey. The man came into the room, standing before Rain and regarding him coolly.

“Listen, I didn't hit him, he fell,” Rain said, starting to grow a bit concerned.

The armored man looked at Gus. “What is he saying?”

“He brought in a man who was hurt, Wallace says he will be fine.”

“I don't care,” replied the armored man, turning back to Rain. “You broke guild law.”

“What? I don't...” Rain was caught off guard, having no idea what the man was talking about.

“You used magic in the city.”

“What? No, I just...”

“You did. You caused a disturbance in the square. An angry <something> called the Watch, and the Watch called me.”

Is this about yesterday? Gus said it was fine, and none of the adventurers... Rain gulped. No, wait, he just said that it wasn't against the rules of the city and that I was an idiot. What is 'guild law'?

“Guild Law? What...” Rain asked.

“The guild is only <something> in the city because we have a <something> with the Watch. You made them call me. Guild law is what I say it is.”

“I just... It was only purify...”

“I don't care.”

“But...”

“I. Don't. Care.” the man cut him off. “Pay the <something>, or get out. 500 Tel.”

“Five hundred!? Someone took my money! I can't, I don't have...”

“Then you are <something> from the guild until you pay.”

Rain turned to Gus for help. Gus jumped as if remembering something, then handed the armored man the quest slip which Rain now noticed he was still carrying. The man glanced at it and snorted, crumpling it in a fist and tossing it onto the table.

“490 Tel. Out,” he said, standing to the side and pointing to the door. “Move, or I will move you.”

He scrambled to his feet and tried to protest, but as soon as he started to speak the man grabbed him by his shirt collar, tearing it slightly and lifting him off the ground. He bodily hauled him from the room and across the quest hall. Rain was helpless to resist the man's massive strength.

When he reached the door, he set Rain down, then tore his guild plate off of the leather cord around his neck along with a significant portion of his shirt. The man violently shoved him out the door. Rain stumbled and fell backward down the stairs to land hard on the ground. Rain cried out as he felt his leg twist under him, sending a sharp pain shooting up his spine. The door slammed and Rain was left sprawled on the cobblestone of the guild square in the twilight of the slowly setting sun.

The square was deserted as Rain laboriously pulled himself to his feet, wincing at the shooting pain in his leg. His health had dropped noticeably, and his stamina was practically empty. He waited, hoping Gus or someone else would come out to help him, but nobody came.

He must be stopping them. What the fuck is that guy's deal? A 500 Tel fine, just because someone complained to the Watch? That is insane! Purify is harmless! I didn't even break a real law! I saved that guy, too. He would have died down there if I hadn't brought him out. That asshole didn't even care!

Rain slowly limped across the square, heading for the city gates. He had learned from Jamus that the Watch's punishment for vagrancy was hard labor and he wasn't hopeful about his chances of convincing an innkeeper to let him stay for free in his bruised and battered state. He was too exhausted to go back to the sewer and hunt slimes until he had enough Tel to rent a bed.

He trudged his way through the city, passing several patrols of the Watch as the sun continued to set. He kept his head down and tried to walk without limping, not wanting to catch their attention. The guards let him out without comment when he reached the gate. There was still a bit of traffic despite the late hour, but people seemed to be giving him a wide berth as he limped down the road leading away from the city.

Rain was in no mood to try approaching one of the other travelers to beg shelter for the night. His opinion of humanity was riding pretty low at the moment, and he just wanted to find a safe spot to rest and lick his wounds. His thoughts had cooled a little bit, but he was still fuming. The target of his anger had shifted slightly, however.

Idiot, idiot, idiot! I should have known that using magic like that was a bad idea. I got greedy and I brought too much attention to myself. Damn it!

He kept himself going with sheer stubbornness until he found a low hedge running along the road, marking the border of some farmer's field. There was no sign of the Watch, so he got down on his knees and peered under the branches. He wriggled himself under the hedge until he was hidden from the road. He didn't want to have to explain what he was doing out here if a patrol came around, so he pulled himself deep into the hedge and tried to find a comfortable place to curl up for the night.

Rain shivered from the cool air as he closed his eyes, thoughts spiraling in a dark vortex of anger and self-reproach.

My pack was in the guild. That asshole has my blanket.

19: Succor

The man walking down the Eastroad was wearing an orange robe and had a pointy hat on his head. He was searching for something by the way he was scanning the fields on either side of the packed dirt of the road. Occasionally, he glanced down as if to consult something, but anyone watching would have only seen him staring at his palm.

To Jamus's eyes, his hand held a great leather-bound book, opened to reveal a page filled with the details of his very being. The book was cumbersome, but only because he wished it to be so. He could have just let it float in front of him, but he preferred the feeling of the heavy tome in his hand. The book contained the sum total of his attributes and skills and he felt as though that deserved some heft.

At the moment, he was interested only in a single number. He checked it from time to time, in between scanning his surroundings. It hadn't changed since he had left Fel Sadanis, but he kept checking anyway.

Without warning, the page of the book turned all on its own, drawing his eyes away from the low hedge that he had been inspecting. Though the page had turned in the book, the information shown was the same, listing out the mage's attributes on the left and the detailed breakdown of his statistics on the right. Jamus smiled and stopped.

He backtracked until the page turned forward once more, the number returning to its original value but leaving the rest of the information unchanged. Jamus started counting his paces as he walked forward again, starting from when the number increased and not stopping until it dropped back down to its base value. The page turned forward each time the number changed. He backtracked again, stopping at half the distance he had measured out.

Jamus snapped the book closed with one hand, causing a small puff of dust. He then dropped it. The book disappeared as if it had never existed.

"Rain. I know you're there. Come out."

The hedge rustled. A man wearing torn workman's clothes crawled out from under the hedge. He climbed to his feet with some effort, clearly in pain.

"..."

"Are you ok, Rain?"

“Fine.”

“You don’t look ‘fine’.”

A burst of white light washed over the two men, removing the stains of dirt from Rain’s clothes, but doing nothing for his torn shirt.

I can’t believe Halgrave kicked him out of the guild for that.

“How did you find me?”

“They told me what happened between you and Halgrave in the guild. I asked around. The Watch told me that you left the city, heading this way.”

“But how did you know I under the... the...”

“Hedge.” Jamus supplied. “You leave that mana regeneration aura on all the time. I was keeping an eye on my statistics.”

Jamus watched as Rain shifted uncomfortably, pulling at the torn collar of his shirt.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?”

“Why did you look for me?”

A pained expression crossed Jamus’s face. “Rain, I’m sorry. For how I treated you on the way back from the mine. I was mana starved and Lavarro... Look, I have no excuse. I should have spoken to you. Should have given you your... Here.”

Jamus removed a pack from his back and handed it to Rain. “I got your things from the guild. There is a new shirt in there for you too, and some rations. And there’s this.”

Rain caught the pouch as Jamus tossed it to him. Setting the bag down, he looked at the pouch, then worked at the drawstring, eventually teasing the tight knot loose and peering inside.

“All that was dropped by the dark hounds. Every last Tel. It won’t get you back in the guild, but...”

“Jamus, I... You...”

“Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t just me. The others gave up their shares as well. Even Lavarro.”

Jamus pretended not to notice the beginnings of tears welling up in Rain’s eyes as the younger man retied the bag. Rain turned his back to him and opened the pack, tucking the pouch inside and pulling out the shirt.

“I had to guess at the size. Sorry if it doesn’t fit.”

Rain pulled off his old, torn shirt, folded it, and placed it in the pack. He then pulled on the new one, which was dyed a drab green. It seemed to fit well enough.

Jamus heard Rain take a steadying breath and waited patiently until he turned back to face him. When he finally did, his face looked tense, as if he was trying to keep it from displaying whatever emotion he was battling.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. You helped us quite a bit on the road. Everyone appreciated that aura of yours.”

“Even Lavarro?” Rain said, softly.

“Yes, even Lavarro. I haven’t felt that clean in years, the others must feel the same. Look, don’t think too badly about her, she has reasons for doing what she does. She even gave you her share. Though I think that was less about you and more about spiting Halgrave.”

“Halgrave?”

“Big blue bastard. Armor. Bad attitude. Don’t tell him I said that. He is in charge of all the adventurers in Fel Sadanis, at least on paper. You really haven’t heard of him?”

“No, I just...met...yesterday.”

“You must be from further away than I thought. Everyone around here knows who he is. He is kind of a big deal. The only gold rank adventurer for hundreds of leagues, though Lavarro is close. He and Lavarro, well... You have a sketch of him in your notebook that explains that.”

Jamus’s mouth quirked up in a half smile at the memory of the breakup. It had been thoroughly epic. *They could have sold tickets. I’m surprised nobody’s made a play about it yet.*

“My...?”

Rain fished out the notebook from the pack, flipping through it until he froze when he got to the page where Jamus had drawn in Mahria’s family tree. Looking over his shoulder, Jamus chuckled wryly.

“Yes. He is Mahria’s father.”

“But that means Lavarro... She and Halgrave... No way....” Jamus was relieved to see Rain’s face relaxing, seeming to be a bit more of his old self.

“Haha, I know, right? Talk about a scary couple. They aren’t together, if you were wondering. Not anymore. Small tip, don’t talk about Halgrave when Lavarro is around. You wouldn’t like the result.”

“Jamus, thank you. For this. For everything.” Rain held up the notebook.

“I said don’t worry about it. Now, how do you feel? Can you walk?”

“Yes,” Rain said, nodding.

“Good. I can’t take you back into the city. The Watch knows who you are, and until you have paid the fine to the guild they won’t let you back in, even if you did still have your plate. I have an idea, though. I know a man who lives out by the forest to the south of the city. He is a bit odd, but then, so are you. You should get along, unless... Have you ever met a cervidian before?”

“Cervidian?”

“Guess not. Well, if you don’t know, it will probably be fine. It is about a half hour walk. Think you can make it on that leg?”

By way of response, Rain picked up the pack and slipped it on.

“Thank you.”

“Again, I said don’t mention it.”

“Wait.”

Jamus halted, turning to regard Rain as he limped up to him. The pair had been walking for around twenty minutes, Jamus keeping his pace slow to accommodate his wounded companion. Rain really was limping quite badly.

Really? He’s that hurt just from getting pushed out of the guild?

“Are you ok? Can you continue?” Jamus asked.

“I just need a minute,” Rain said, wincing and lowering himself to sit on a stump by the side of the road.

“Sorry, I don’t have any healing spells.”

“It is ok. I will be fine in a minute. I have a question.”

Uh-oh, here we go.

“Go ahead.”

“What is health?”

“Is that a... philosophical question?”

“Philosos... What?”

“Philosophical. What is art? What is beauty? That kind of thing?”

“Philosophical question. I see. Thank you. No, this question not philosophical. What is health? What does it do?”

“You really don’t know? Have you never been wounded before?”

“Jamus, please. I want to know what is health. My health is full, but my leg hurts. Why?”

...*What?*

“Wow. You actually don’t know, do you? Sorry, I don’t mean to insult you. You should never be ashamed of not knowing something, but this...”

Jamus seemed to consider for a few minutes, the process of his thoughts hidden from Rain by his impassive face.

“Health represents the vital force of a creature. It is not the same thing as the integrity of your body, but it *is* connected. If you are wounded, your health will go down. The more health you have, the less damage your physical body will take from any given blow.”

“Yes, I know some of those words.”

“Ah, good. If you are well enough to sass me, then you are well enough to walk. Come on, we’re almost there.”

Rain got painfully to his feet and Jamus offered him his shoulder to lean on. Rain waved him off, insisting on continuing under his own power.

“Humm. I will try to use simple words. Stop me if you don’t understand.” Jamus spoke slowly, continuing his explanation to keep Rain moving and his mind off the pain.

“If someone were to strike you with a fist, it would reduce your health.”

Rain nodded, so Jamus continued.

“If you have enough health, your body would not be hurt by the blow.”

Another nod, though it looked like Rain was struggling not to ask another question.

“If they struck you again, your health would be lower that time. The second punch might leave a bruise.”

“So health is like a shield?” Rain asked.

“No, not quite. That is a resistance. Health is different. A shield blocks damage. But health is...” Jamus paused, having more difficulty explaining simply than he thought he would. He didn’t really spend much time thinking about something so basic that he took it for granted.

“Some damage will go to your body. It depends on how much health you have and how strong the attack was. A sword blow might cut off my arm where it would only scratch someone like Carten.”

“And health regeneration? Would your arm...come back?”

“It depends. Regeneration and healing are also similar, but again, they are not the same. When your health is full, your body will heal quickly, but it won’t grow back an arm. For something like that, you need *overhealth*.”

Jamus paused, making sure that the other man was still following his explanation. Seeing Rain’s attentive expression, Jamus pressed on.

“Healing or regeneration skills can push you past your maximum health. This is called *overhealth*. The higher the overhealth, the bigger the wound that can be healed.”

“So, my leg?”

“A healing spell, even a weak one, would cause enough overhealth to heal it. Without that, it will heal slowly. Faster, if your health is full.”

“And a missing arm? Could I regenerate...?”

“No, only a large amount of overhealth could do that. And only if you got it quickly. The longer you have had a wound, the harder it is to heal.”

Rain held up a hand to stop Jamus from continuing. “Thank you, I think I understand.”

Wait for it...

The silence lasted only a minute before Rain asked another question.

“If there is overhealth, is there underhealth? When your health is empty, do you die?”

“Usually,” Jamus said in a considering tone.

“Usually?”

“It is damage to your body that kills you, not having no health. If you *do* have no health, it is very easy to be damaged. *Underhealth* does indeed exist. There are things that reduce health without damaging the body. These things are rare, except for age. When you are underhealth, your body will start to take damage. Eventually, you die.”

Jamus held up a hand to forestall any further questions. “We are almost there. His place should be right around... shit!”

Jamus took off at a sprint. He and Rain had been following a dirt track through the trees south of the city. However, instead of finding the slightly shoddy wooden walls of the shack he had been expecting, there was only a burned out ruin standing in the center of the small clearing.

“Tallheart! Are you here? Are you ok?” Jamus yelled, searching the clearing for any sign of his friend. To his relief, he heard an answering call coming from the direction of the river. As Rain joined him in the clearing, Jamus saw the tall form of a man heading towards them.

The tall man was wearing battered silvery-gray plate armor that fit him like a second skin, and he wore a moth-eaten black cloak wrapped around his shoulders. He wasn't wearing a helmet, and a large pair of deer's antlers sprouted from his forehead, marking him as not quite human. He had short brown hair, large brown eyes, and a stern face with a well-defined jaw. Jamus waved and moved to greet him.

“Tallheart! What happened? Are you ok?”

“Hello, Jamus. I am fine. I did not expect to see you.” The man replied in a deep bass voice.

“I suppose you are. What happened to your house?”

“I burned it down.”

“What!? Why?”

“It was infested. There was a spider.”

“A spider? What kind of spider? Please tell me you’re joking.”

“It was the only way to be sure.” The antlered man cocked his head at a strange sound coming from Jamus’s companion.

“Jamus, who is this human? I do not know him. Why does he laugh?”

Jamus kicked Rain, who quickly schooled his face and extended a hand to the man.

“Hello. I am Rain. Nice to meet you.”

The antlered man regarded Rain coolly, then turned back to Jamus.

“Jamus, why have you brought this strange human here?”

“Come on Tallheart, just shake his hand already. You’re being rude.”

“Jamus, I do not know him.”

“Look, it is fine. Rain, this is Tallheart. Tallheart, this is Rain. There, now you know each other.”

Reluctantly, Tallheart reached out and shook Rain’s hand firmly, then quickly released it.

“You should shave. Your face looks unappealing with that scraggly beard.”

“Tallheart! We talked about this! You can’t say things like that!”

“It is the truth.”

“That isn’t the point!”

“Apologies, Jamus. I sometimes forget how sensitive you humans are. Now tell me why is he here.”

“I need a favor. Rain here got kicked out of the guild. He needs a place to stay.”

“What did he do?” Tallheart narrowed his eyes, appraising Rain suspiciously.

“As I understand it, all he did was make Halgrave look bad in front of the Watch. Something about flouting the law by showing off in the square. That depths-cursed man is such a trial. Why is it always the assholes that rise to power?”

“Then he is a fool,” Tallheart replied, looking away from Rain dismissively.

“A fool who needs our help. He has no-one else, Tallheart.”

The antlered man looked down at Rain again, an unreadable expression on his face as he examined him. Rain smiled back uncertainly, looking to Jamus for guidance.

“Humph. I suppose he is not as bad as most humans I have met. Very well. He may stay with me.”

Hah, got him!

Jamus smiled, having predicted Tallheart’s sudden reversal of opinion. Tallheart turned to a surprised-looking Rain, further shocking him by bending at the waist in a full formal bow.

“Greetings, Rain, friend of Jamus. I am called Tallheart. You may stay here until I decide otherwise.”

Awkwardly, Rain returned the bow.

“Greetings, Tallheart. Thank you for sharing your home.”

“Good. You are not entirely hopeless. For a human.”

20: Outcast

Rain sat on a stump gnawing at a ration. The strain on his jaw was helping him ignore the twinge in his leg. Jamus and Tallheart had wandered over to the site of the burned-down building and were discussing something in voices too low to carry.

Rain didn't know quite what to make of the antlered man. He was the first person Rain had met that clearly wasn't human. Apart from the antlers, he looked pretty normal, if a bit on the large side. The armor made it difficult to get a read on his build, but Rain was sure that the man could snap him in half like a twig.

He decided to let me stay here, though, so I probably don't have to worry about that. Humm, 'Until I decide otherwise', he said. I better try to stay on his good side then. Jamus seems to trust him at any rate. What is with the antlers? Are there more people like him?

Hearing his name, Rain got to his feet, wincing at the pain in his leg. It was feeling better than when he had woken up under the hedge, but it was still pretty sore. He made his way over to the other two, trying not to limp too badly.

At least I will heal. That strength ring probably saved my ass. Maybe literally. That asshole threw me down the guild steps pretty hard. Would I have broken my tailbone if I landed on the stone like that without the extra health?

Rain joined the other two looking at the ruins of the small shack. The roof had caved in and only one of the walls was left standing. It hadn't been a large building, but there was a significant quantity of ash and charred wood lying about.

"Rain, I have to go back to the city. Will you be ok here?"

Rain nodded to Jamus by way of reply. "Thank you," he said, having been expecting this. He offered Jamus his hand to shake. This time, the mage accepted his thanks, grasping his hand firmly.

"You're welcome. I'll come check on you in a few days, maybe a week. Lavarro didn't say where we are going."

"Why does she do that? Why don't you complain?"

"Part of the contract."

“Contract? Not to complain?”

Jamus smiled. “She hired me to go with her on some quests. Carten too. That is why the ‘no complaining’ thing is part of the agreement, by the by. She doesn’t need our help with the monsters. She wants Mahria to learn what it is like to fight with a party.”

“So, you aren’t a real team? With Lavarro?”

“Not really, no. Carten and I are <somethings>. We <something> from team to team. It is more common than you would think. I owe her two more missions. I don’t know how many Carten <something> up for. Once I am done, I’ll come help you pay off your fine.”

“No, you don’t have to do that, I...”

“Quiet. I don’t mind. After adventuring with Lavarro, it will be a <something>. Oh, that means a break from work, a *vacation*.”

Tallheart injected himself into the conversation. “If you are going, go. I have work to do.”

“It was nice seeing you too, old friend.”

“Yes, but you still talk too much,” Tallheart replied, turning his back to the pair and moving towards the ruins of his hut. Rain watched him as he started knocking down the remaining section of the wall. He was pulling it apart effortlessly with his gauntleted hands.

“Jamus, who is he? Why does he live out here?”

“He is an old friend. If you want to know his story, ask him. I really have to go. Just try to make yourself useful, ok?” Jamus clapped Rain on the shoulder, then turned and started walking back towards the city. He gave a small wave, then disappeared into the trees.

Make myself useful, he says. I can do that.

Rain walked over to where Tallheart was working. He had finished demolishing the wall and was piling the larger pieces of wood off to the side of where the hut had once stood. There was a good amount of soot in the air from the wall’s collapse and his armor was covered in it.

“Tallheart. I can help.”

“Then do.”

“I will use a spell. It is harmless.”

Tallheart didn't respond, tearing apart a large section of the fallen wall and tossing the pieces onto the pile.

Ok, I guess he doesn't mind then. Let's see if I can do this in one go.

Rain had briefly reviewed his notifications after he had woken up, but hadn't been in the mood to think about them too much. Jamus had found him before he could work up the motivation to crawl out from under the hedge. The level up and the ranks in refrigerate, purify, and winter hadn't been enough to overcome his melancholy.

Now in a significantly better mood, Rain walked to the center of the former hut and kicked a few pieces of wood out of the way to make a place to sit. He slipped the ration bar he was still carrying into a pocket and sat down in the ash, preparing himself for the loss of all his senses.

Purify.

He left the skill on for a good minute, using all of his modifiers. He stopped when his mana started to get low instead of draining himself dry. Opening his eyes, he surveyed his handiwork. The rubble of the hut surrounded him, but the ash was completely gone. The wooden scraps were jagged, but clean. It seemed that his aura was now strong enough to scour away the burned wood, leaving only the larger, unburned fragments behind.

Nice. It couldn't do that before. It definitely is getting stronger, even if there is no number on it.

“That skill. What is it?”

Rain stood, turning to look at Tallheart. The man had stopped working and was watching him. His armor, though still battered and scuffed, was shining in the mid-morning sun.

“Purify.”

“Good skill.”

Rain grinned. Seeing that the antlered man had resumed working, Rain moved to help him with the rest of the debris.

“So. You are a mage.” Tallheart stated after the two had worked for a few minutes. It wasn’t a question.

“Something like that.”

“Good. Mages are useful.”

“And you? Are you a warrior?”

“No.”

Rain wasn’t taken aback by the curt response. He had expected it based on how the antlered man had been speaking to Jamus earlier.

Not a big talker, this guy.

“So then, your armor...”

“I wear it, always. It is strong. I made it that way.”

“Made it? So you are a smith?”

“Something like that,” Tallheart replied, echoing Rain’s earlier words.

Ok, so he does have a bit of a sense of humor. He is just very... direct.

The two continued working, Tallheart seeming to be content with the silence as the pile of wooden scraps grew. Feeling a bit awkward, Rain focused on the work, looking for anything salvageable in the wreckage. There wasn’t much. He did find a few small metal items that had survived the fire, which he set off to one side.

“Enough,” Tallheart said after an hour or so, just as Rain was about to throw in the towel. They had reached the point of diminishing returns, the remaining scraps of wood not being large enough to bother with.

“What now?” Rain asked, re-activating his purification aura to wash away his sweat.

“I do not want to sleep outside. We will rebuild.”

“Ok, sure. Do you have any tools, or..”

“I have what you see.”

Shit, how do we build a house without any tools?

“Go and cut down a tree, then bring it back here. I will think of something.”

What does he want me to do? Punch it down?

“I can’t do that. I don’t have an axe.”

“Fine. I will get the tree. You think of something.”

Rain stood on the packed dirt where the hut had been, looking around as Tallheart walked off towards the forest. He had no idea how they were going to build anything without any tools. He looked at his belt knife, then the pile of metal scraps. There wasn’t anything there that could be used to cut or shape wood.

He said he made his armor. He couldn’t have made it out here, not without a forge or a workshop or something. He can’t be living this way by choice. Ok, so other than my knife and whatever he is carrying, we don’t have any metal tools. I suppose I could try to make a stone axe or something, but that would take forever.

Rain jumped at a loud boom that came from the direction of the forest and was accompanied by the sound of wood splintering. He looked up to see a medium-sized birch tree falling, cut down at the base. Tallheart watched it fall, then grabbed a branch and started dragging it back towards him.

Ok, no tools, but we do have a man who can cut down a tree in a single hit. That could go a long way. How did he do that? He didn't actually punch it, did he?

Tallheart reached the bare dirt and dropped the tree. As he did, Rain saw a small hammer hanging at his waist before it was covered again by his cloak. The bottom of the tree looked like it had been smashed, not cut cleanly, so Rain decided that the hammer was the probable cause.

“Did you think of anything?” Tallheart asked him.

“No, not yet. I have some ideas, but without any tools... Do you know how to build a house?”

“No.”

“Maybe we could dig some holes and put the trees in like a... a...”

“Say what you mean.”

“Sorry, I don't know the word.”

“Humph,” Tallheart snorted. “Stick the bottom in the ground and stand it upright?”

Rain nodded. “I guess. We would want to take the... branches... off first. We also don't need it to be so tall. Cut it to three meters, maybe four?”

“Meters?”

“A meter is about... here, let me just show you.”

Rain walked over to the tree, pointing to a spot on the trunk. It wasn't a very big tree, but it was big enough to have a large, straight section of trunk without any branches up to the point he had indicated.

Tallheart turned to regard the tree. He walked over to the trunk and reached to his belt, retrieving his hammer. It had a short handle and looked like a smith's tool, not a weapon. Tallheart motioned Rain back from the spot he had indicated, then swung the hammer down at the tree with the full force of his body. It hit in an explosion of splintering wood, breaking the tree completely in two.

Holy shit.

Tallheart grabbed the trunk of the tree and walked it upright while Rain looked on in amazement. The man's strength was ridiculous, greater by far than either Ameliah's or Carten's.

"Where?"

"Um, over there by the edge, I guess. We need to dig a hole first."

Tallheart surprised Rain again by lifting the tree trunk completely off of the ground as he walked over to the indicated spot. He dropped the trunk unceremoniously and knelt to consider the packed dirt. Choking up on his hammer, he drew it back and placed his other hand on the ground to steady himself. He then punched the ground with the hand holding the hammer, making a deep *whump* sound and causing the earth to shake. He retracted his arm, which had sunk into the dirt down to the elbow.

Holy fucking shit.

Tallheart scooped out some of the dirt, then repeated his hammer punch a few times, widening the hole. Standing, he picked up the tree trunk once more. He slammed the end down into the hole with great force, sinking it deep into the earth. He released the trunk, which was leaning slightly, but nevertheless standing upright. Scowling, he pushed it straight, then kicked dirt into the hole and stomped it down to lock the trunk into place.

"Good. This will work for the frame. I will go get more."

Tallheart walked back off towards the forest, leaving Rain staring at the three-meter section of tree trunk sticking out of the ground. It hadn't been a massive tree, only about as wide around as his thigh, but the strength required to manhandle it like that was absurd.

Who the hell is this guy? Or what?

By the time they stopped to rest for lunch, the outline of the new building was starting to take shape. Tallheart had sunk four large trees into the earth to form the corners of the building with several smaller ones in between to serve as posts for holding up the walls. Those Rain made by wedging in thin branches that Tallheart had removed for him. He wove them in like strands in a wicker basket.

This was nothing like the construction that Rain knew. It was clear that they had no idea what they were doing, but Tallheart seemed willing to try anyway. Rain was doubtful that the building would be able to keep out a light breeze, let alone any real weather.

When Tallheart called a halt, Rain sank down in relief, the soreness in his arms having eclipsed the pain in his leg.

“I will eat by the river. Do you have any food?” Tallheart looked at Rain as he said this, expression unreadable.

“Just ration bars. Jamus gave me many. Do you want one?” Rain asked, getting back to his feet and walking towards where he had left his pack.

“No. I cannot eat those.”

“Yeah, they are more like rocks than food. The taste is boring, too.”

“It is not a problem of taste. They contain animal <something>. I cannot eat them.”

“Oh, you are a ... sorry, I don't know the word. A person who won't eat meat?”

“Not won't. Can't. I am not like you humans.”

“Sorry,” Rain said awkwardly. “I don't have anything... not meat. Just some jerky.”

“I will be fine. Come, the river is this way. We need water.”

Rain followed Tallheart toward the river, which turned out to be only a few minutes' walk away from the clearing. When he reached it, he refilled his waterskin and took a long drink after purifying the water. He looked for a spot to sit and fished out his half-eaten ration bar and a bit of jerky from his pack. Tallheart had waded into the river and was pulling up some greenish plants from the water. They looked like weeds to Rain, but to Tallheart they were apparently edible. He joined Rain on the side of the river, chewing a mouthful of soggy plant matter.

“What are those plants?”

“It is just water <something>. Here.”

Tallheart passed Rain one of the fibrous stalks. Rain inspected the plant, then hesitantly tasted it.

Huh, tastes a bit like grass.

“I don’t think I can eat this,” Rain said, using his knife to trim off the section he had bitten into. He then offered the remainder of the plant back to Tallheart.

“I would not expect you to,” the man replied, taking back the stalk and biting into it. Rain looked at the jerky he was holding, feeling a bit guilty.

“You don’t mind if I eat this here, do you?”

“Why would I?”

“Well, it is meat, and I thought that... It doesn’t bother you?”

“You are human.”

Ok then. I guess he is fine with it.

Tallheart stared at the water, chewing his meal. From the set of his shoulders, Rain thought he looked a bit sad, but it was hard to tell with the armor. Something had definitely changed since the morning. The man was quiet, seeming lost in his own thoughts.

“Do you like them? Do they taste good to... people like you?”

Shit, please don’t get mad. Rain winced, realizing how his question might have been received just after the words had left his mouth. He had no idea about the racial politics of this world, so he was trying to be careful. Offending the antlered man seemed like a really bad idea.

“No. They do not.”

“Oh,” Rain said weakly.

The two ate in silence, Rain watching the water flow past and listening to the sounds of the forest. It was cold near the river, the sky cloudy and overcast. The sound of the birds was peaceful, but Rain was

feeling on edge from the mood that had fallen over his companion. As time went on, the silence between them deepened until even the river seemed shallow.

Tallheart finished his meal, but made no move to leave, staring down at his feet. Rain decided to finish his ration bar as quickly as possible instead of trying to start up another conversation.

“I did not burn down my shack because of a spider.”

“What?” Rain asked, slightly confused by the abrupt statement.

“I burned down my shack, but it wasn’t because of a spider. That was a lie.”

“Oh, ok.” *Why is he telling me this?*

“I can tell you have questions. Ask.”

Well, if he brought it up, I suppose it is a safe enough place to start.

“Ok, why did you burn down your shack?”

“I do not know. I think... I did not have a reason.”

“But...” Rain stopped himself. *He sounds so sad. What brought this on?*

“Ok, so you were going to go to the city or something?” he asked instead of pressing him for a reason.

“No. I cannot go to the city.”

“Somewhere else then?”

“There is nowhere else.”

“Why?”

“Not all humans are like Jamus. I am not welcome.”

“Sorry...” Rain looked down at his boots uncomfortably.

“I do not blame you for the actions of your race.”

“So, humans and cervidians... aren't friends?”

“No.”

“What about... other cervidians? Could you go live with them? In a cervidian city?”

“My people are...” Tallheart paused, then continued in a soft voice. “There are no cervidian cities. Not anymore.”

Shit. And I thought I was alone in this world. What the hell happened to his people? Is he the last one?

The silence stretched on as Rain considered his next question. Tallheart's face was stony and his mood seemed to have darkened even further. Rain shivered. If anything, it had gotten colder since the morning.

“Tallheart?” Rain asked, catching the man's attention.

“Yes, Rain?”

“Why are you letting me stay here? How do you know Jamus?” he asked to change the subject.

“We met two years ago, soon after I first came to this forest. He was kind to me, and he asked me to help you. That is enough. You may stay with me until Jamus comes back. After that, I do not know.”

“Thank you.”

Tallheart stood abruptly. “We should finish the hut. It will be a cold night.”

Rain scrambled to his feet and joined him as he stumped back towards the clearing.

By the time that the sun started to set, the two had managed to complete something that could have charitably been called a shack. It was full of gaps and the roof was just piled leafy branches, but it had four walls and a doorway. There wasn't much room inside, but Tallheart could lie down without bending his knees or hitting his antlers on the far wall.

Rain had swept out the inside of the hut with a leafy branch, then dug a shallow hole in the ground. He filled it with leaves to make himself a slightly softer place to sleep. Tallheart had left his side bare, refusing when Rain had offered to do the same for him. Rain's bed was completed with a pillow made from his old shirt, stuffed with leaves.

Rain and Tallheart were standing outside the hut, surveying their handiwork.

"It will do," Tallheart said with a resigned sigh.

"Looks pretty awful, but I don't think it will fall down," Rain said with a shrug.

"Rain."

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For today. You are... a good human."

"Thanks, I guess. You are a good cervidian. You are the only one I have met though."

"Humm. Yes. Where are you from that you have never heard of my kind?"

"Far. Very far."

Tallheart looked at him silently. Rain considered how much to tell him. He was still hesitant to reveal that he was from another dimension or world or whatever the term was. He wasn't sure if he could trust the antlered man. He didn't feel threatened by his strength anymore, not after spending the day with him. Tallheart seemed to be a quiet, gentle man filled with a deep sadness in his core.

He told me a little about himself, so I think I will do the same. Trust has to start somewhere.

"I..." Rain started, then cleared his throat. "I am from... somewhere very... different. I do not know how far it is. I was... brought here. By magic, I think. I did not know the name of the city. I had never heard the language before."

Tallheart nodded for him to continue.

"I woke up in the forest. Adventurers found me and brought me to the city. I joined the guild... maybe a week ago? I have lost track. I did a few jobs, but then I tried to make some money and... angered the Watch. Someone told... shit, I forgot his name. Someone told the asshole in charge of the guild. He fined me 500 Tel and kicked me out of the city. Now I am here."

"Humm," Tallheart seemed to consider.

Rain shifted uncomfortably. He hadn't even told Jamus this much. Somehow, he felt that his secret would be safer with Tallheart than the slightly eccentric mage.

"I have heard of teleportation magic, but nothing that strong. To not have heard this language... To have never heard of a cervidian... Your home must be very, very far."

"Yes."

"I believe you. No one could fake an accent like yours."

"Hey!"

Tallheart was smiling softly, the first sign of levity Rain had seen from the man since their conversation at the river.

"You should sleep," Tallheart said. He turned and started towards the forest.

"Where are you going?" Rain asked.

"Do not worry. I will return. I must relieve myself."

"Oh, hang on."

Rain activated purify. He held the spell for around a minute as Tallheart's expression cycled from mild curiosity, to puzzlement, then to pure disbelief.

“Rain? Remember that I said you could stay until Jamus returned? I take it back. You can stay as long as you want.”

21: Smith

“Damn it!” Rain swore at the scraps of wood in front of him. He had been trying to light a fire for the last fifteen minutes using his flint and steel, but the damp wood refused to catch. It had rained overnight and the roof of the hut had been decidedly less than waterproof. He had slept poorly, and now he was cold, damp, and irritated.

What I need is some lighter fluid.

Tallheart was no help. He had disappeared somewhere before Rain had woken and wasn't anywhere near the clearing. Rain, left to his own devices, had decided to get a fire going to dry himself out. He had been stymied by wet wood and his own inexperience with starting a fire. He had shaved off some splinters of wood with his knife, but the fire refused to catch no matter how many showers of sparks he had sent cascading over them.

He shivered and pulled his sodden blanket tighter around his shoulders. This wasn't working. Sitting back on his heels, Rain resigned himself to a miserable morning. He would try to light the fire again a little later, once things had dried out a bit. To take his mind off how cold and damp he was, he pulled up his training overview from the day before.

| Training Overview |
|----------------------------------|
| <u>General Experience Earned</u> |
| Stamina Use: 84 |
| Mana Use: 2027 |
| <u>Skill Experience Earned</u> |
| Extend Aura: 496 [Rank Up] |
| Purify: 883 |
| Winter: 138 |
| Amplify Aura: 496 [Rank Up] |
| Aura Focus: 14 |
| Intrinsic Clarity: 272 [Rank Up] |

*Huh. Something isn't adding up here. Intrinsic Clarity should have earned much more experience than that. It has been matching my overall experience from mana use... Oh! That must mean... **skills**.*

Skills

Refrigerate (4/10) Exp: 356/700

31-35 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 4 meters

Cost: 20 mp/s

Extend Aura (6/10) Exp: 165/1600

Extend aura range by 6 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 220%

Purify (7/10) Exp: 1060/2200

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 7 meters

Cost: 70 mp/min

Winter (3/10) Exp: 146/400

Multiply M.Regen by 130% for all entities

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 3 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (10/10)

Multiply base mana regeneration by 300%

Amplify Aura (6/10) Exp: 277/1600

Multiply aura intensity by 160%

Multiply aura mana cost by 220%

Detection (5/10) Exp: 65/2200

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 0.60 meters

Range: 5 meters

Cost: 5 mp/s

Aura Focus (1/10) Exp: 62/200

Focus on an aura to boost its output

Multiply aura intensity by 120%

Multiply aura range by 120%

Multiply aura mana cost by 120%

User loses all external senses while focusing

Free Skill Points: 2

Tracing his finger down his skill list, Rain stopped at intrinsic clarity. The skill showed 10/10, meaning it had hit maximum rank. Rain pulled up his notification log and searched it for anything new, but there was nothing. It seemed that there wasn't an obvious bonus for reaching maximum rank on a skill.

What a fucking letdown. So it just caps out? No skill evolution or perk or anything? Lame. I'll ask Tallheart about it when he gets back. He might know if there's something I'm missing.

Rain considered his two free skill points. He had a few options for what to do with them. Right at this moment, immolate was looking pretty tempting. Based on the strength of refrigerate, it would go a long way towards helping get the fire going. He doubted that it would actually set anything on fire without leveling it up a bit first, but it would help dry out the firewood. He didn't want to make a hasty decision, though. He already had refrigerate for offense. Unless he ran into an ice monster, he didn't think immolate would be that much more effective at keeping him safe.

Velocity was another option. Being able to move faster would be a huge advantage for combat. The cost was a bit steep to use it for travel, but he might get there eventually if he kept investing in clarity. Rain wasn't sure if the speed stat would just boost his physical body, or his mind as well.

Another question for Tallheart. Where the heck did he run off to?

Rain looked around the clearing, but there was no sign of the armored man. He glared back at the unlit firewood despondently. There didn't seem to be any point in trying again yet. He kept his skills window open and pulled up his attributes and statistics as well. He dragged them around until he could see all three windows without them overlapping.

| Attributes | |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| Richmond Rain Stroudwater | |
| Level 9 | |
| Experience: 2840/5035 | |
| Dynamo | |
| Health | 400 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 400 |
| | |
| Strength | 20 [10] (+) |
| Recovery | 10 (+) |
| Endurance | 10 (+) |
| Vigor | 10 (+) |
| Focus | 20 [10] (+) |
| Clarity | 100 (+) |
| | |
| Free Points | 10 |

| Statistics | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| | Total | Base | Modifier |
| Health | 400 | 400 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 400 | 400 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 540 /hr | 375 /hr | -15/hr 48% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

| Resistances | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

I have 10 free attribute points I could spend. I made it to 100 clarity like I said I would, but I kinda want to keep going. I want more mana too, but investing in regen is more economical with my class. If I can get more of these rings then I can probably get by without it. Tallheart said he was a smith... I wonder if he can make something like this.

Rain idly twisted the focus ring on his finger, considering.

One more question for him then. Still, I could just get a clarity ring and put the points in focus instead. Same thing, right? Focus boosts damage too, but that is only for refrigerate. None of my other skills have the (fcs) annotation. Humm. I might be better off just training refrigerate to rank it up. The damage boost from going up a rank is way higher than what ten points of focus would get me.

Rain stopped as he came to a sudden realization, then hit himself in the forehead.

I am just sitting here with full mana like an idiot. He groaned as he realized that he had missed out on a ton of experience the day before. With all of the activity surrounding the construction of the hut, he had forgotten to periodically use his skills. He resolved to do better today and switched to his detection aura. As much as he wanted to train refrigerate, he was already freezing. Adding a layer of ice to everything didn't seem to be in his best interest.

He made sure he was seated securely and activated the skill, using aura focus, amplify, and extend to boost it. The world faded to black silence, but his menus remained visible in front of him. He noted that the mana cost for the skill with all of the boosts was almost 30mp/s by focusing on it on his status screen. He had chosen Tel as the object of his search, but there weren't any within the range of the skill other than those in his pack. He let his mana drop down to zero before canceling the skill.

Crap, that may have been a bad idea. Rain admonished himself as light returned to the world. He hadn't even considered that he would be left helpless if a monster attacked him while he was out of mana. There was a sudden noise behind him and he shouted in alarm, jumping to his feet at the imagined threat.

"Good, you are awake."

"Tallheart! Fuck! Don't do that!"

The man chuckled with a bass rumble. "I was not being quiet. You should pay more attention."

"I was using a skill that... never-mind. You have a point."

"There are no monsters in this forest. That does not mean there is no danger."

"No monsters?"

"No monsters. There are animals. And humans."

"What... is a monster?" Rain asked a question that had been bothering him for a while now. He had seen normal animals he was familiar with, as well as some strange creatures like boar-rabbits. None of them had shown a health bar or a level indicator, though, unlike the Skiffun and the dark hounds.

Tallheart cocked his head and considered Rain for a moment before answering. Thankfully, he didn't challenge him on his lack of knowledge.

"Monsters are not alive. They are not <something>, they come from nothing. In a higher rank area, there will be more. Stronger."

"Not <something>? I don't know that word."

"Humm," Tallheart considered. "When two animals <something>, you get more animals, after a while. The new animals are <something>. Monsters come from nothing."

"*Born?* Monsters are not born? They... appear?"

"Yes. But only in areas with a high rank. The word for a monster appearing is <something>."

I'll go with 'spawn'. Even if it isn't technically correct, it fits with the fantasy theme. But still, spontaneous generation? Wasn't that how they used to think you got things like maggots before someone invented the microscope? So monsters just... show up? Is he sure about that?

“Why? How? What does it mean, rank? Rank of a place?”

“Light the fire and I will tell you. It is too cold to stand here answering all of your questions. Have you eaten?”

Belatedly, Rain realized that Tallheart was carrying a tattered burlap sack. He set it on the ground and reached into it, pulling out an apple and offering it to Rain. “Humans can eat these. Here.”

“Oh, an *apple*, what is the word for these here? Thank you,” Rain said, taking the slightly shriveled fruit.

“Apple,” Tallheart replied with the word in common. Rain quickly fished in his pack for his notebook to write down the word, as well as the others he had just learned. He was honestly a bit surprised at how little trouble he was having with the language now. It really was simpler than English.

“Rain. The fire?” Tallheart prompted him, watching as he scribbled in his notebook.

“What? Oh, sorry. I tried to start it, but it is too wet.”

“That is not the problem. Here. Watch.”

Tallheart knelt and drew out a flint and a tiny knife from a pouch hanging from his belt. He set the flint down for the moment and used the knife to scrape at a piece of wood. He wasn't paring off large splinters like Rain had tried before. Instead, he used the edge to shave away the fibers of the wood, making a sort-of fluff. He added this to the pile of splinters Rain had been trying to light. The fluff caught with the first shower of sparks from Tallheart's flint. He leaned in and blew softly, feeding oxygen to the embers. Soon, the larger splinters caught and the fire started burning in earnest. Tallheart sat back, his armor not preventing him from assuming a cross-legged position next to Rain.

“There.”

“Sorry, I am not good at this stuff.”

“I have shown you how. The rest is practice.” Tallheart fished in the sack and retrieved an apple for himself. He bit into it, chewing slowly as he fed larger and larger pieces of wood into the fire.

Rain considered his own apple. It looked to be a bit overripe, but otherwise normal. He took a hesitant bite. It was mealy and a bit dry, but it was otherwise fine. He took another bite, thankful to have something softer than a paving tile to eat.

“Rank,” Tallheart said, recalling Rain's previous question. “This forest is without rank, as is the city and the plains. That is why the city is here. No monsters will spawn.”

“Different places have different rank? Why? There are slimes below the city, they are monsters, right?”

“Yes. I do not know why. Different places will have different rank. Rank always increases as you go down though. The sewers must be deep enough for your slimes to spawn. The rank of a place is the <something> level of the monsters there.”

“Oh, I see. Then what is a...” Rain consulted his notebook, “What is a lair? I heard about them in the guild.”

“A lair is a place with an abnormally high rank. Many monsters spawn there.”

“Are there any around here?”

“No. Why?”

“I need Tel. Monsters drop them, right?”

“Adventurers,” Tallheart said tiredly, shaking his head. “Yes. Monsters drop Tel. Do not go to a lair alone unless you are much stronger than you seem.”

“I’m not an adventurer, at least, not right now. I’m not sure I even want to be one, anymore. I do need to pay the fine to get back into the city though.”

“You humans and your rules. You cannot enter the city without paying the fine?”

“Right. I need an adventurer’s plate to get in, or a ... residency permit,” Rain said, checking his notes from when Jamus had been telling him about the Watch.

“So get the second one.”

“How?”

Tallheart laughed bitterly. “You are asking me? I do not know. I cannot enter the city either.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” Rain winced, remembering the foul mood Tallheart had fallen into the day before. To change the subject, he asked one of the questions he had decided upon earlier.

“Hey, Tallheart, do you know what happens when a skill reaches maximum rank?”

“Yes. I suppose you want me to tell you, too.”

Rain nodded.

“Humph. When a skill reaches maximum rank, you have mastered it. That is all. More practice will not help you improve.”

“That’s it? No reward?”

“Correct.”

“Damn it. So I’m going to be stuck at 10 forever?”

“Perhaps. It is possible...” The man trailed off.

“How?” Rain prompted him, trying not to seem too eager.

“Powerful equipment can add a rank to a skill. My armor... I could make such things. Once.”

Rain sat back and took a big bite out of his apple to give himself some time to think.

Shit, another sore subject. He can't make anything out here. For a smith, that must be heartbreaking. Why hasn't he tried to build a workshop or anything? He'd just need... huh, a lot of stuff, actually. He has his hammer, but I don't see an anvil or a blast furnace around. Something like that would have survived the fire. There were just a few scraps of metal. Oh, he probably wouldn't have the materials to make anything, even if he had the tools. Damn.

“If I found you metal, could you make one?”

“No. It takes more than metal to make such a thing.”

“How about something like these?” Rain raised his hands, showing the man the two rings he was wearing.

Tallheart barely spared them a glance. “Humph. Trash.”

“What? Why?”

He motioned for Rain to hand him one of the rings, so he removed the focus-boosting one and handed it to him. He wasn't at full mana anyway, so lowering his maximum mana wouldn't cost him anything. Tallheart examined the ring, holding it up to his eye, then shaking his head and handing it back.

“This was made with little skill. It will only last a few more days. I hope you did not pay too much for it.”

“What?! It is going to break? Can you fix it?”

“I could, but why? It would be better to make one that would last. This was made for a smith to practice, or to keep customers coming back.” The antlered man shook his head. “Humans,” he sighed.

Rain slipped the ring back on and spun it around his finger, thinking.

“So you could make a better one? What would you need?”

“For a ring? Metal, of course. Gold would work, at a minimum. <Something> is wasted on a ring. It could be done, but there is no reason to waste so much.

“<Something?>”

“That ring is made of it, but it has not been <something> enough to hold the enchantment.”

Oh, iron. Iron is wasted on a ring, he said. So different metals are good for different things?

“How about copper?”

I could get Jamus to trade in some of my Tel for coins, and then we could melt them down... Damn, how hot do you need to get metal before it melts?

Tallheart snorted at this. He didn't dignify the question with a response.

“I can probably find metal. I have a skill. If I do, can you make something?”

Tallheart's eyes flashed at this. “A skill to find metal?” The sudden excitement in his voice shocked Rain. “Please try, even if all you can find is copper or <something>. I have been wandering this forest for two years and all I have found is in that pile.”

Tallheart pointed to the small pile of metal scraps outside the door of the hut. “I want to make something again, even if it is trash.” There was a fire burning behind the man's eyes as he looked back to Rain.

“Two years? That is all you found? Why stay here? Why not find a mine or something?”

“The Watch does not bother me here. Humans use this forest for wood, but little else. If I left, I would be hunted.”

“Oh, sorry. Umm. Could we ask Jamus to bring us some metal?”

“I have thought of that. It would not be enough. I do not want to ask it of him.”

“He could have someone else bring it to you... Shit, I forgot. It might be hard to find a... good merchant. A good *human* merchant.”

“Welcome to my life.”

Rain tried not to smile. The familiar phrase from the man had struck him as funny due to how unexpected it was and the serious tone with which he had said it. He didn't want his reaction to offend the man, so he schooled his face to stillness.

“What should I look for? With my skill, I mean. What metal?”

“Anything. Iron would be best. I will need an anvil, first. Your skill, how does it work?”

“I can sense things in a... radius? Is that the word? Radius?”

“Yes. How large?”

“A few meters. Oh, sorry, you don't know meters. Umm... maybe from here to the hut?”

Tallheart's face sunk at this.

“Too small.”

“It goes down too. I can feel things under the ground. It is a... a... Damn.”

“A *sphere*?” Tallheart asked, placing the tips of his gauntleted fingers together to form the shape.

“Yes, a sphere. Thank you.”

“Then perhaps there is a chance. You will have to walk and use the skill frequently. Can you do that?”

“I think so, if I only use it quickly. It takes a lot of mana.”

“Is that an issue? I know how you mages can be with hoarding mana.”

“It shouldn’t be. My regeneration is... insane.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I am not a... normal... mage.”

“Humph. I should have expected it. You are a very strange human.”

“Thanks?”

Tallheart got to his feet, throwing the core of his apple into the fire. “Give me an hour. I will make you a shovel.”

“A shovel?”

“If there is metal here, I have not found it. That means it is under the ground.”

Rain watched as Tallheart walked over to the pile of metal scraps outside of the hut. He pawed through them, collecting a few of the larger pieces. He brought them back over to the fire and tossed them in. The largest piece was a bucket with the bottom rusted through. There were a few other recognizable items, such as a tin cup and what might have been a piece of a copper lantern.

“Are you sure that the fire will be hot enough?” Rain asked.

“It is not.”

“Then how...”

“Enough questions. You are worse than Jamus.” Tallheart made a shooing motion.

Rain retreated to the other side of the fire to give the man space to work. He still needed to dry out and he was planning to watch, but he didn’t want to get in the way. It didn’t look like there was going to be much to see for a little while though. Tallheart was slowly feeding the fire with more wood as he waited for the metal to heat.

Maybe he has some skill to make the fire hotter? I didn't see anything like that in any of the craftsman trees, but it could be a higher tier.

Suddenly, Rain realized that the reward for reaching rank ten in a skill might not be nothing after all. He pulled up his skills menu and opened the full list of items in the magical utility tree. He could only see the tier 0 skills he had already reviewed, along with the option to spend experience to reveal the next tier.

Level ten means I probably meet the prerequisite for a tier 1 ability. For 100 experience, I'd be an idiot not to at least look.

Rain spent the required experience and watched as a new set of skills was revealed.

Magical Utility

Tier 0

Intrinsic Clarity (10/10)

Multiply base mana regeneration by 300%

Intrinsic Focus (+)

Multiply base mana by 120%

Tier 1

Overcharge

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 points in Intrinsic Focus

Mana Manipulation (0/10) (+)

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 140.0 mp/s (fcs)

Requires 5 points in Intrinsic Clarity

Channel Mastery (0/10) (+)

Allows intuitive control of channeled skill intensity

Minimum skill intensity: 90%

Maximum skill intensity: 110%

Skill mana cost modified by intensity adjustment

Hidden Skill, Revealed by Meeting Requirement

Requirement: Two channeled skills at level 5

Requirement: 10 points in Intrinsic Clarity or Intrinsic Focus

Tier 2
Locked

His eyes were immediately drawn to the glowing blue text near the bottom.

Hidden? There are hidden skills too? What does it do? Allows intuitive control of channeled skills? Auras are channeled skills, right? They must be, if I meet the requirement. I guess there is a way to control them after all. Makes sense that Jamus wouldn't know about it; he said he didn't have any channeled skills. Yeah, I'm taking this. Oh, hang on, let me check one thing. I'm pretty sure I am right about this, but I want to make sure.

“Tallheart?”

“What?”

“Sorry, I have one more question.”

Tallheart gave a sigh and motioned for him to go ahead. “One question.”

“Ok, I will make this quick. If I have two skills that affect the strength of something, do the numbers add, or multiply?”

“Multiply, usually.”

“Awesome, thanks.”

Tallheart nodded, then stood. “Do not touch the fire,” he said, then headed off for the treeline. Rain put aside his curiosity about where the man was going and looked back to his menu. He put a point in channel mastery and applied the changes.

This is exactly what I wanted. Well, one of the things I wanted, anyway. Amplify aura is 160%, aura focus is 120%, and now another 110% from channel mastery. Shit, I need paper.

Opening his notebook, Rain worked through the multiplication. He had a bit of trouble. His grade-school skills had been atrophied by a lifetime of easy access to a calculator. Eventually, he came up with a factor of 2.1 for the combined effect of the skills. He smiled. It would only get better as each of the support skills leveled up. The mana cost would be similarly multiplied, but channel mastery would also let him reduce the intensity to save mana when he didn't need full power.

Already having winter active, he tried to activate channel mastery to boost the skill as he did with amplify aura. Nothing happened, however. Confused, Rain brought up his skills to re-read the description.

Allows intuitive control... Humm, so can I just...

Instead of trying to activate a modifier, Rain simply willed additional mana into the feeling of winter. To his delight, he could sense the flow of mana into the skill increase. It was now working like he thought it should have originally. The barrier that he felt in his mind when he used a skill now felt sort-of squishy. He could freely vary the strength of the aura, within the bounds of channel mastery.

Increasing it to max, he pulled up his statistics menu to see that his regeneration had increased to 557 mp/hr, up from 540. The math checked out. Tallheart had been right; the skills multiplied.

Nice! I need to practice this so it ranks up.

Rain was interrupted from further experimentation by Tallheart's return. The man was carrying a large hunk of granite, about the size of a mini-fridge. Rain's eyes bulged as he dropped the rock next to the fire with a *whump* of impact.

It is going to take me a while to get used to that.

Tallheart inspected the rock, then adjusted it slightly so a mostly flat spot was on top. He then knelt next to the rock and placed his hammer on top. Rain stood to watch as Tallheart moved dangerously close to the fire. He reached straight into it with his gauntleted hands, heedless of the flames. Rain stopped himself from shouting in alarm. He moved to get a better angle so he could see what Tallheart was doing.

The man had grabbed the metal bucket with both hands and pressed it flat. The fire wasn't hot enough to make the metal glow, but Tallheart was folding it easily, like it was cardboard. He kept folding it on itself until he had a small twist of metal about the size of a fist. He squeezed this tightly in both hands, then brought it out of the fire and placed it on the rock. He hit it lightly with his hammer, flattening it down. He then returned it to the fire.

He repeated this with the other metal pieces until they were all small lumps of different colors sitting amid the coals. The metal looked ragged and torn, not being anywhere near hot enough to properly weld itself together. Rain stayed silent.

Tallheart reached into a pouch at his waist and retrieved two Tel. They looked tiny, held in his gauntleted fingers. He placed them on the rock, then retrieved the smallest of the lumps of metal. Rain thought it had been the tin cup, but he wasn't sure. Tallheart pushed the Tel into the lump of metal with his fingers. Instead of shattering like Rain had expected, the crystals sank into the metal easily. The smith placed the lump of metal back on the rock and picked up his hammer.

He pounded it flat, the strength of his blows ringing in the clearing. He must have been holding back considerably as the granite anvil didn't immediately explode from the force. The metal started to weld to itself after he had folded and flattened it a few times. If nothing else, the Tel appeared to have made the metal easier to work.

He retrieved the next lump of metal, copper this time, and added it to the first. As he hammered and folded, the two metals mixed in a way that didn't seem right to Rain. The color changed from gray to yellowish as the copper mixed with the tin.

Bronze? Did he just make bronze?

Tallheart didn't stop there. He added in the remaining small pieces of metal but left the large hunk of iron in the fire. He added in two more Tel as well, pressing them into the metal and continuing to knead it like dough. The metal was starting to turn red from heat. Rain was sure that it was more from the abuse Tallheart was laying on it than it was from the fire.

Finally, Tallheart retrieved the lump of iron and added it to the mix. The colors of the various metals melded together under the assault of his hammer, blending into a uniform brownish gray. Once they were completely mixed, Tallheart started pounding the lump of metal out into a flat shape on the stone. The outline of a shovel blade quickly formed before Rain's eyes. The metal wasn't behaving like he expected at all. The way Tallheart shaped it seemed far, far too easy. The man had even made a socket for the handle to attach to the shovel blade by rolling up a section of the metal and pinching it back together with his fingers.

Metal doesn't work like that!

Rain's indignation didn't change the reality of what he was seeing. Tallheart had somehow melded together all of the various metals into an alloy that made no physical sense. Rain was no metallurgist, but he knew you couldn't just weld bronze to steel. The Tel must have changed something about the process, that or Tallheart was doing some magical bullshit with a skill.

The metal of the shovel blade was still glowing red hot, but Tallheart tossed it back into the fire before standing and stretching his legs. He replaced the hammer on the loop at his belt and turned to Rain. He sized him up, then moved towards the pile of spare branches to find a handle of a suitable length.

Rain realized that his mouth was open and closed it quickly.

So that is what smithing looks like when you add magic to the mix?

He looked at the granite boulder. Its surface was shattered from the repeated impacts of Tallheart's hammer.

I can't even imagine what he could do with proper tools. That was crazy.

Tallheart returned in a minute with a relatively straight branch. He reached into the fire to retrieve the shovel blade. Counterintuitively, it looked like it had cooled during its stay in the fire. He lined up the end of the branch and pressed it into the socket he had forged in the shovel blade. The wet wood smoked and hissed as Tallheart squeezed the socket tight, locking it in place.

He handed the completed shovel to Rain, the wood still smoking slightly where the head had been attached to the handle. Rain took it carefully, making sure to keep his hands far away from the hot metal.

“Don't you have to... put it in water or something? To cool the metal fast?”

“No.”

“I am impressed. This looks really good.”

“It is not.”

“You should have seen the spear I made.”

“We work with what we have.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find you some metal. Do you want to come with me?”

“I will stay here. There are a few small pieces of metal left. It was good to make something again. I will continue.”

“Tallheart, you’re smiling.”

“I suppose I am.” The man laughed. “Go on. You have digging to do.”

Tallheart’s happiness was infectious and Rain was grinning as he walked into the trees despite the cold and wet start to his day.

22: Search

After departing the clearing earlier that morning, Rain had confirmed that just leaving his detection aura on constantly wasn't an option. The mana drain was just too fast. Instead, he had decided to use it in quick one-second pulses as he walked. He had even started making a pinging noise each time he activated the aura, imagining himself as a submarine sonar operator. He had set the target of his search as metal, not specifying a particular type. He had confirmed that this was a valid target back in the clearing by testing it on the various remaining scraps.

Even with this technique, his mana had been draining quickly. The range was too small for him to proceed at a full walking pace if he wanted to be thorough in his search. He had gotten bored of just using his detection aura over and over again, so he had decided to take the opportunity to build up some information about how all his various modifiers interacted. To this end, he started experimenting as he walked, testing different combinations. He was interested in finding the most efficient configuration to maximize the speed at which he could scan the forest.

Eventually, he had stopped to rest and draw up a table of all the possibilities in his notebook. It would have taken him way too long to calculate all of the parameters, so he decided to just fill in the table as he searched the forest. For each row of the table, he would walk around ten meters, then pause and activate the skill with the specified combination of modifiers. In the case of channel mastery, he tested three cases: off, maximum boost, and maximum restraint. With his skills window open, he was able to see the combined effect of the modifiers, but only for the second that the skill was active. He would quickly memorize the numbers long enough to write them down in his notebook before repeating the process.

It had taken him all morning, but he had finally filled in every last row of the table. He had to repeat a few rows several times to make sure that he had them correct. He wasn't in a hurry, though, so he didn't stress about it. It helped him to keep his mind off the fact that he hadn't detected any metal other than that which he carried with him. He'd stopped to have lunch and copy over the table, fixing all of his crossed out mistakes. Pencils were a thing in this world, but erasers weren't. He reviewed the table and massaged his jaw as he gnawed on a ration bar.

| Amp. | Ext. | Fcs. | Chnl. | Resolution (m) | Range (m) | Cost (mp/s) |
|------|------|------|-------|-------------------|--------------|----------------|
| | | | - | 0.64 | 5 | 4.5 |
| | | | | 0.6 | 5 | 5 |
| | | | + | 0.56 | 5 | 5.5 |
| | | + | - | 0.57 | 6 | 5.4 |
| | | + | | 0.52 | 6 | 6 |
| | | + | + | 0.47 | 6 | 6.6 |
| | + | | - | 0.64 | 11 | 9.9 |
| | + | | | 0.6 | 11 | 11 |
| | + | | + | 0.56 | 11 | 12.1 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|------|------|-------|
| | + | + | - | 0.57 | 13.2 | 11.88 |
| | + | + | | 0.52 | 13.2 | 13.2 |
| | + | + | + | 0.47 | 13.2 | 14.52 |
| + | | | - | 0.42 | 5 | 9.9 |
| + | | | | 0.36 | 5 | 11 |
| + | | | + | 0.3 | 5 | 12.1 |
| + | | + | - | 0.31 | 6 | 11.88 |
| + | | + | | 0.23 | 6 | 13.2 |
| + | | + | + | 0.16 | 6 | 14.52 |
| + | + | | - | 0.42 | 11 | 21.78 |
| + | + | | | 0.36 | 11 | 24.2 |
| + | + | | + | 0.3 | 11 | 26.62 |
| + | + | + | - | 0.31 | 13.2 | 26.14 |
| + | + | + | | 0.23 | 13.2 | 29.04 |
| + | + | + | + | 0.16 | 13.2 | 31.94 |

I... might've gotten a bit carried away. Call me a completionist I guess. Still, I think I have a pretty good handle on what's going on here. If I take the superset of all modifiers as an example, can I work out the formulas driving this?

Rain had long finished his ration bar by the time he was done playing with the numbers. He had been determined not to move on until he had finished his calculations. His mana had been full for some time when he finally set down his pencil.

Base cost for detection is 5 mp for 1 second, times 2.2 for amplify, times 2.2 for extend, times 1.2 for focus, times 1.1 for channel mastery gives 31.94 mp and change.

Have I mentioned I miss calculators? At least multiplication is easier than division.

Range is easier. Just extend and aura focus to deal with there. Base is 5 meters, plus 6 for extend, times 1.2, so 13.2 meters. Looks like the addition happens first, so I've got that going for me, which is nice.

Resolution is the tough one. The skill started at 1 meter at rank 1 and has been going down by 10cm each rank. At rank 5 it is 60cm, base, so that is 1 meter times (rank minus 1) times 10cm. Looks like it is the 10 that is getting multiplied.

10 centimeters times (5 minus 1), times 1.6 for amplify, times 1.2 for focus, times 1.1 for channel mastery is 84 cm. 1 minus that is 16cm, so yeah.

I... might have too much time on my hands. Still, I am glad I worked through all that, even if it did take forever. My legs needed the rest anyway. Huh. It looks like it would be possible for the resolution to go negative. What would that even mean, physically? Right now, it is more like an accuracy than a resolution. I can be off by around half a meter with the base skill, independent of the size of the object.

Negative accuracy? What does that even mean? Could this happen with other skills? What if I divide by zero? Does my head asplode? Maybe I should ask someone before I try it...

Rain closed his notebook with a snap and tucked it back into his pack. Getting up off the log he had been sitting on, he stretched his stiff neck and looked around. He had been exploring along the river to avoid getting lost, but he didn't want to go too far from the clearing. He decided to start heading back, but he walked a bit further from the river so he could cover new ground. The trees were fairly thick, but he could see the sun so he wasn't that worried about losing sight of the river. Worst case, he would come to the edge of the forest even if he missed the clearing.

He let off a ping and started walking, making his way carefully through the trees with the shovel resting on his shoulder. The combination of modifiers that he had decided upon was extend, focus, and minimum strength via channel mastery. This gave him the maximum range of 13.2 meters without needlessly boosting the resolution. Pinpoint precision wasn't needed until he got a signal. The cost per ping was only 12 mana, so he could do a ping every minute or two and not worry about his reserve dropping too low. He still had to go slowly, but the sedate pace didn't bother him. It gave him time to pick his way through the underbrush and keep an eye out for anything else interesting.

He settled into a rhythm, not bothering to sit down whenever it was time to release a pulse of his detection aura. Trying not to fall over was proving to be good practice for dealing with the effects of aura focus. After about two more hours, he was even able to do it without breaking stride, though it did feel a bit like missing a step at the bottom of a staircase.

The journey back was faster than his original walk down the river. He reached the clearing after another hour, but Tallheart was nowhere to be seen. He took a quick break to rest, using purification to freshen himself up. While he waited for his mana to recover, he looked around for any changes in the clearing. The pile of metal scraps was gone, but there wasn't anything else different that he could see. A ping for metal revealed nothing, so whatever Tallheart had made, he had taken it with him.

Once he was back up to about two-thirds of his mana bar, he set back out, walking another ten meters or so further from the river. He was getting a bit frustrated that he hadn't found anything, but he kept himself going through sheer determination. He had told Tallheart that he would do it, so even if it turned out that there was no metal for kilometers he was still going to give it his best.

Around an hour later, Rain came to an abrupt halt. His last pulse had pinged against something behind him. Excitedly, he walked to approximately where he had felt the signal and used a maximized pulse of detection. He was trying to get a better fix on its position by using all of his modifiers. He felt the signal, much clearer this time. It was almost directly below him and about a meter down. He wasn't sure what it was, but it felt pretty big.

Jackpot!

Unslinging the shovel from his shoulder, Rain eyed the forest floor. Luckily, the signal was coming from a relatively clear stretch of earth, not directly beneath a tree or something. He broke ground carefully, not entirely trusting the strength of the whatthefuckium alloy of the shovel blade. It wouldn't do to break it in half by hitting a rock too hard. The bark of the unfinished birch handle was smooth in his hands as he started digging in earnest.

Periodically, he let off pulses of detection to keep himself pointed at the source of the signal. He didn't want to dig a bigger hole than he had to. A meter was plenty deep enough, and Rain still wasn't in the best of shape. His old diet of cheesy poofs and frozen dinners being replaced with meat, vegetables, and construction supplies had started to show some effect. However, he was still panting and wheezing after about half an hour of effort.

Rain stopped to rest, surveying the hole he had dug. He was getting there. The shovel had proved to be stronger than he had expected. The blade was having no trouble cutting through the medium-sized roots that he had encountered. Still, he was careful not to strike with too much force; the goal was to get more metal, not break the first tool that Tallheart had made in two years. He used purify to clean himself of sweat and dirt as he rested, not using aura focus so he could watch the progress of the effect. The white light washed away the dirt from his skin and clothes, but it did nothing for the pile of dirt on the ground.

Why? Why does it work on some dirt, but not all dirt?

Rain inspected a section of tree root that was lying on the ground outside of the hole. He had removed it in one piece after cutting it with the shovel. The root was clean, looking like it had been washed thoroughly. There were more roots back in the hole, well within the range of purify. However, unlike the one next to him, these were still dirty.

Is it because I cut it off from the tree? Obviously it works on living things, so that isn't the issue. Maybe it is because a tree root is supposed to be covered in dirt when it is in the ground? When I cut off this piece, I guess that changed. You might wash a root you had harvested, but you wouldn't wash a plant's roots while it was still using them. Who decides what is supposed to be clean, and what isn't? Is it me? If I decide that I want to live in this hole, could I trick the skill into cleaning it for me?

Feeling slightly silly, Rain gave it a try. He pictured himself as Richmond R. Underhill, owner of a nice, dry hole with a round door and a doorknob in the exact middle. He then activated purify, willing it to clean away the dirt and save him the effort of more digging. He gave it up after half a minute, seeing that the purifying light was doing nothing other than draining his mana.

Well, there goes that idea.

Picking up the now gleaming shovel, Rain resignedly got back to work, using detection to re-center himself on the signal. It took him another twenty minutes of digging, but his shovel eventually struck a hard object with a clear ringing sound. Rain eagerly jumped down in the hole and searched around with his hands, feeling for the object. He managed to worm his fingers under it and lift it out of the hole with some effort. About the size of a large grapefruit, it was slightly lopsided and incredibly heavy. Panting, Rain activated purify to clean away the dirt and see what he had dug up.

It is... a meteorite? Sure looks like one. Score! I have no idea what metal this is, but aren't meteorites supposed to be great for making weapons? Space Sword, here I come!

Rain regarded the meteorite where it lay on the dirt. Now he had to figure out how to get it back to the clearing. He decided that it wasn't heavy enough that he'd need to get Tallheart. He shuffled a couple things around in his pack to make sure it would stay centered, then slipped it inside. He carefully lifted the pack and settled the straps across his shoulders. The well-made pack seemed to be up to the strain, so he started walking towards the river, intending to return along the relatively clear bank.

It took him quite a while to lug the hunk of metal all the way back. By the time he reached the edge of the trees, the sun was setting and his stamina was almost completely empty. His back was aching and his legs felt like jelly. Only the shovel was keeping him upright with him using it as a walking stick.

“Tallheart!” he called out as he approached the hut. To his relief, he saw the antlered man’s head poke out of the doorway. He waved him over, dropping the shovel and slipping off the pack. He sat on the ground, panting as Tallheart made his way over to him.

“Rain. You look like you are dying.”

“I feel like I am dying. That thing is heavy!”

“So then...”

Rain grinned and untied the pack, slowly lifting out the meteorite and placing it on the ground in front of Tallheart’s feet.

“A fallen <something>. Excellent. Do you have any more?”

“More? That thing almost broke me.”

Tallheart chuckled, examining the hunk of metal. “Mages. So puny and weak.”

“Yeah, yeah. What do you think? Can you use this?”

“Humm.” Tallheart laid his hand on the side of the meteorite. “It is 90% iron, with some <something> and traces of <something> and <something>. It will be <something> unless I <something> the metals.”

“Sorry, all I caught was ‘iron’. You can tell what it is made of?”

“Yes. I will teach you your metals later. It will be important, if we are to continue.”

“So, can you use it to make a sword or something?”

“Can you use a sword?”

“...no, but... space sword...” Rain trailed off.

“Aren’t *meteorites*, uhh, I mean fallen stars, good for making weapons?” he tried again, guessing at the meaning of the word Tallheart had used before.

“Not this one. A small anvil though... Yes, this would work. Will you give it to me?”

“Yes, take it, please.”

“I thank you. I have a gift for you as well.”

Tallheart reached into a pouch at his waist and pulled out a small metal object. He handed it to Rain with a warning. "Careful, the edge is sharp."

"A... knife?" Rain examined the short, single sided blade. It was much thinner than his utility knife and the metal had a yellowish sheen. The short handle was made from the same metal as the blade.

"I must ask you for one more thing," Tallheart said, expression unreadable.

"Sure, what do you need?"

"Please use the <something> to shave off that pathetic beard."

"Hey!" Rain protested indignantly. "It's not like I have a mirror or anything..."

Tallheart was laughing as he picked up the meteorite and walked back towards the hut.

23: Paralysis

“Owwwww,” Rain moaned as he leaned back against a boulder. His legs, arms, and back were incredibly sore from the two days of back-to-back labor. First, he had helped Tallheart build a shack, then he had spent a whole day traipsing through the forest. Carrying the heavy meteorite had been the straw that broke the camel’s back, and now he was paying for it.

When he woke, he had barely been able to move. He had forced himself to get up and stretch out his muscles, knowing that if he didn’t he would only take longer to recover. He was walking with a noticeable limp, the pain in his leg from his earlier injury having returned with a vengeance. His stamina was only around half, his natural recovery not being enough to restore him to full overnight. Rain didn’t feel like he would be up for half a day of exertion, though.

I guess it works the same way as health. I feel way worse than I should, just based on the numbers. I suppose I need overstamina if I want this soreness to go away faster. I need to unlock those damn well auras. If I had the stamina one, I could just dump mana into the problem. I am sure as hell not wasting attribute points in vigor when that is on the table.

Rain rubbed at his shoulder as he rested against the rock. He had walked down to the river to get some water and stretch his legs. Tallheart was back at the clearing building... something. Rain had no interest in going back to help the man move rocks around, so he had decided to stay down here for a little while. He had seen the boulder upstream and walked over to it to investigate. The smooth rock was on its own in a little sandy outcrop into the river. The sand was coarse, but not too unpleasant, so he decided to make it a beach day and took off his shoes. Now, he was resting his back against the cool stone to soothe his aching muscles.

The sun was up and shining warmly, promising that it would be a much nicer day today. Rain had brought his pack with him, but didn’t pull out a ration bar to have breakfast yet. His jaw was just as sore as the rest of him.

To take his mind off his body, he pulled up his attributes panel. He had reviewed his training overview earlier, noting that he had reached level 10 and ranked up in extend aura and aura focus. He hadn’t gone any further than that though, so a review of his full status was next on his morning agenda.

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 10

Experience: 3372/6091

Dynamo

| | |
|-------------|-------------|
| Health | 400 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 400 |
| | |
| Strength | 20 [10] (+) |
| Recovery | 10 (+) |
| Endurance | 10 (+) |
| Vigor | 10 (+) |
| Focus | 20 [10] (+) |
| Clarity | 100 (+) |
| | |
| Free Points | 20 |

Twenty free points, huh? Well, if I'm not spending them on vigor, recovery is right out. Clarity is the obvious choice if I want to maximize the benefit of Dynamo, but strength, endurance, and focus deserve a little consideration too.

Endurance would help with my low stamina, but just raising the cap wouldn't help me with my current problem. It would also give me some resistances, but there are the defensive auras for those. If I can find a way to use more than one aura at once, that would be the ideal solution. I'm guessing there will be one for each damage type, or maybe even one that boosts all of them. If I can get that going, then I can just use mana to reduce damage, like a mana shield. I really need something to keep me from dying in one hit from a strong enemy.

Strength would give me more health, and that is important for the whole 'not dying' thing. Still, there isn't really anything that dangerous in this forest according to Tallheart. Can I hold out until I get my resistance auras going? I am hoping that there will be one for physical damage in a higher tier. Apart from the health issue, I still don't know if boosting strength makes me physically stronger. I don't notice a difference with the ring, but there has to be something going on here. There is no way Tallheart got that strong by just doing push-ups. I'll have to ask him about that. I wonder if his people have the same taboo around talking about stats and stuff. Maybe I'll ask him that first so I don't offend him.

Right, back to the issue at hand. Last up is focus. Boosting that would help the damage of refrigerate and let me keep my higher base mana pool once this ring breaks. Damn adventurer shop guy neglected to mention that whole issue when I bought it. Focus doesn't really help the other auras though. I don't think I'll be fighting much of anything in this forest, but later on, I'll want more mana so I can do more damage in a single burst. Also, if I get those resistance auras going and leveled up, I will need the bigger mana pool to absorb damage. If I invest in anything other than clarity, it would be focus.

Do I really want to risk it, though? I only got dynamo because I put everything into clarity up until level five. I didn't get any notifications about classes or anything at level 10. I can't get back into that menu either, but something tells me that there'll be another chance eventually. If I keep dumping points into clarity, maybe I can get that 3x boost even higher. I don't wanna spend points in other stats and jeopardize that.

“Arg! Can't decide!” Rain said aloud, paralyzed by indecision.

Pulling out his notebook, he turned to a fresh page and started a list of questions. He was planning on cornering Jamus when he returned, as Tallheart started getting cranky if you asked him too many things in a row. As he wrote down his questions about the effects of attributes on the body, he suddenly realized something.

He had been doing a lot of physical activity lately and it was starting to have an effect; he was able to walk for a full day now without feeling like hot death. That hadn't been the case before; his couch-potato lifestyle had left him completely winded after half a day of walking when he was with Hegar's group. Despite the improvement to his endurance, the attribute of the same name hadn't budged.

Can you raise an attribute by training? If not, then what the hell is going on here?

He added the question to the list and set the notebook aside to look back at his attributes screen.

I don't wanna leave these uninvested either... Damn it! I wanna put them in clarity for the regen, but I don't wanna get splattered into a paste if a monster so much as sneezes at me. Maybe I can get Tallheart to make me some armor or something. Wait, how does armor work? Does it reduce damage, or...? Fuck, there I go again. Writing it down, more questions for later.

Rain added the question to his list, then a few more that he thought of as he was writing down the first. Belatedly, he remembered that he was supposed to be deciding what to do with his stat points. He set the notebook aside reluctantly.

Fuck. Well, I can't decide. I guess no decision is a decision too, so uninvested they will stay until I get some answers. It isn't like there are any monsters around here, and I'm not exactly in a rush.

Ok, now for skills. Let's see how I'm doing here.

Skills

Refrigerate (4/10) Exp: 356/700

31-35 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 4 meters

Cost: 20 mp/s

Extend Aura (7/10) Exp: 270/2200

Extend aura range by 7 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 240%

Purify (7/10) Exp: 1735/2200

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 7 meters

Cost: 70 mp/min

Winter (3/10) Exp: 321/400

Multiply M.Regen by 130% for all entities

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 3 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (10/10)

Multiply base mana regeneration by 300%

Amplify Aura (6/10) Exp: 992/1600

Multiply aura intensity by 160%

Multiply aura mana cost by 220%

Detection (5/10) Exp: 1869/2200

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 0.60 meters

Range: 5 meters

Cost: 5 mp/s

Aura Focus (2/10) Exp: 147/400

Focus on an aura to boost its output

Multiply aura intensity by 140%

Multiply aura range by 140%

Multiply aura mana cost by 140%

User loses all external senses while focusing

Channel Mastery (1/10) Exp: 156/200

Allows intuitive control of channeled skill intensity

Minimum skill intensity: 90%

Maximum skill intensity: 110%

Skill mana cost modified by intensity adjustment

Free Skill Points: 2

Gah, winter levels up so slowly! I'm never gonna get those well auras at this rate. I need to level up all the modifiers so I can pump more mana into it. Extend and amplify are pretty high level, and they add a lot. Using them with something like refrigerate gets them a ton of experience, so I should train them that way. Aura focus is starting to get there, but channel mastery is only level one. I was expecting that to level, but it looks like it still has a bit to go. Does it need more experience because it's tier 1? Aura focus too, now that I look at it. Another question for the list.

I have two skill points. What are my options?

Rain opened up the full skill lists for each of the trees he had his eye on. He lined up the panels next to each other, trying to get a full view of his options. As he was trying to decide whether to purchase the next tier of the defensive auras, he came to a dead halt with his finger hovering over the button.

...How... did I do that?

The five instances of the skill panel hung before him, taking up the entirety of his view.

I... couldn't do that before. How the heck did I open multiple copies of this window? I didn't mess around with the options menu, I kinda just... did it. I popped them out into new windows like tabs in a web browser. I am SURE I couldn't do that before.

Rain sat back, rubbing at his eyes. He felt like he should have a headache. Picking up his notebook, he added a few questions about dialogs and the general interface to the bottom of his list before deciding to just get on with it. Setting the notebook down, he spent the required 100 experience to unlock the next tier of defensive auras. He then shook his head and regarded the full list of options available to him in the five trees he had opened.

Magical Utility

Tier 0

Intrinsic Clarity (10/10)

Multiply base mana regeneration by 300%

Intrinsic Focus (0/10) (+)

Multiply base mana by 120%

Tier 1

Mana Manipulation (0/10) (+)

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 140.0 mp/s (fcs)

Requires 5 ranks in Intrinsic Clarity

Channel Mastery (1/10) Exp: 156/200

Allows intuitive control of channeled skill intensity

Minimum skill intensity: 90%

Maximum skill intensity: 110%

Skill mana cost modified by intensity adjustment

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

Locked

I was just looking at this one. Channel mastery was a hidden skill, but there's nothing there now to indicate that it's special in any way. Well, other than how awesome it is. Are there other hidden skills? There have to be... Are they as awesome as channel mastery? Damn it all! Now I want to save these skill points until I figure out how to unlock them. Fuck.

What else do we have here? Mana manipulation? Is mana not just energy? Does it have a form if I 'expel' it? Why would I do that? What the hell is a capacitive item? Damn it, I should be writing these down.

Rain grabbed his notebook again and started writing down the questions. He didn't set it back aside this time, knowing that he would inevitably think of more things to ask as he reviewed the other skills.

Intrinsic focus might be nice. At max level, it would triple my mana pool. If I am going to invest in focus at all, I'll want to pick that up. Not now though, not yet.

Overcharge is a little useless to me. I don't have any 'immediate' spells. Or, at least, I think I don't. What... is.. immediate... spell. There, got it. Rain jotted the question down as he moved on to the next tree.

Offensive Auras

Tier 0

Immolate (0/10) (+)

8-9 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Refrigerate (4/10) Exp: 356/700

31-35 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 4 meters

Cost: 20 mp/s

Tier 1

Radiance (0/10)

8-9 light (fcs) damage per second to entities

Brightens environment (fcs)

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Requires 5 ranks in Immolate

Shroud (0/10)

8-9 dark (fcs) damage per second to entities

Darkens environment (fcs)

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 5 mp/s

Requires 5 ranks in Refrigerate

Shear (0/10)

8-9 force (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Not occluded by mundane materials

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 10 mp/s

Requires 15 ranks in Offensive Auras

Tier 2

Locked

Nothing new there. Man, I really should stop ignoring refrigerate. I'll spend some time practicing it later today. Next.

Utility Auras

Tier 0

Spring (0/10) (+)

Multiply S.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Purify (7/10) Exp: 1735/2200

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 7 meters

Cost: 70 mp/min

Winter (3/10) Exp: 321/400

Multiply M.Regen by 130% for all entities

Range: 3 meters

Cost: 3 mp/hr

Summer (0/10) (+)

Multiply H.Regen by 110% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/hr

Tier 1

Velocity (0/10) (+)

10.0% boost to speed for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/s

Requires 5 ranks in Utility Auras

Detection (5/10) Exp: 1869/2200

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 0.60 meters

Range: 5 meters

Cost: 5 mp/s

Life Well (0/10) (+)

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

Transfer Rate: 1 hp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 1 meter
Requires 5 ranks in Summer

Energy Well (0/10) (+)

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

Transfer Rate: 1 sp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 1 meter

Requires 5 ranks in Spring

Essence Well (0/10) (+)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 1 mp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 1 meter

Requires 5 ranks in Winter

Tier 2

Locked

Nothing new here either. Damn. Just two more ranks in winter and I can get essence well. Do I want that? I could give mana to other people, which would be good for someone like Jamus. Rain's mystical magical instant headache cure! Well, maybe not. I have no idea how much mana the man has. It might take me all day to top him up.

The 20% efficiency wouldn't help matters. It would cost me 100 mana to give him 20. No, wait, it might be worse than that. 'Including user', it says. So I... give myself mana? At 20% efficiency? That blows! For health and stamina I'd be fine with it, but for mana it's just a waste. Unless... does it get more efficient with level? If it is 20% per level, then at level 10, do I get 2 mana for every 1 mana I spend? That can't be right, can it?

Rain sat for a moment, thinking about the implications of his modifiers on the spell.

Jamus won't know about this specific aura, but he might know what happens when you totally break the system. Detection too, the whole negative resolution thing. Another question for the book. Oh, and velocity. Is speed just physical speed, or is it mental speed too? Can't forget that one. If not for the whole hidden skill thing, I'd just spend a point on it right now and find out. I don't want to do that, though, if there are some hidden ultimate techniques just lying around waiting to be unlocked.

Ok, next, defensive auras.

Defensive Auras

Tier 0

Cold Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase cold resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Heat Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase heat resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Tier 1

Arcane Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase arcane resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Chemical Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase chemical resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Dark Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase dark resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Mental Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase mental resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Light Ward (0/10) (+)

Increase light resistance by 3.0% for all entities

Range: 1 meter

Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Tier 2

Locked

*Holy shit, there are a ton of new ones! Mental ward? I'm gonna end up **in** a mental ward because of all these options.*

Looks like none of them have requirements. There is one for each damage type except physical. Damn it, that is the one I want! It must be tier 2, that or it's hidden.

Oh, while I am looking at these, what the hell is an 'entity', anyway? If I use one of these auras, does it give the monsters resistances too? That would suck. What... is... an... entity. There, written down. I suppose it wouldn't be too bad if I was fighting a fire monster. Use refrigerate to attack and heat ward to defend at the same time. It isn't like I can actually do that though. Come on, aura metamagic! Hidden skill to use multiple auras, let's go!

Aura Metamagic

Tier 0

Amplify Aura (6/10) Exp: 992/1600

Multiply aura intensity by 160%

Multiply aura mana cost by 220%

Extend Aura (7/10) Exp: 270/2200

Extend aura range by 7 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 240%

Tier 1

Aura Focus (2/10) Exp: 147/400

Focus on an aura to boost its output

Multiply aura intensity by 140%

Multiply aura range by 140%

Multiply aura mana cost by 140%

User loses all external senses while focusing

Aura Synergy (0/10) (+)

Increase all aura output by 0.1% for each rank in any aura

Requires 1 rank in five different Auras

Tier 2

Locked

Damn it! Nothing. I'm guessing it's tier 2, if it exists at all. Oh, hang on, how... many... tiers... of... spells? Oh, and what... is... level... cap? I might even wear Jamus's patience out with all of these questions.

Right, so I want synergy eventually, that is a given. I only have four auras right now, though, refrigerate, winter, detection, and purify. I could pick up velocity or something, then use my last point on synergy. That would give me...

Rain quickly tallied up the ranks in his other auras.

Nineteen, plus 1 for the new aura I would need, so 20, times 0.1% is a 2% boost to everything. Hardly groundbreaking. I think I can wait on that one. Depending on how fast it levels, even getting it to max wouldn't help as much as working on amplify, focus, and channel mastery.

So, that's everything. No new hidden skills. Do I want to pick up velocity? Maybe one of the defensive auras to start training it so it's actually useful? Fuck me, I can't decide on skills either! I don't really need any of this right now, and all these choices are killing me! What I really want is a way to use more than one aura at a time, that way I can just leave winter on 24/7. If the damn skill didn't level so slow I would be swimming in mana!

Damn it, I'm gonna regret this, but I think I'm gonna unlock tier 2 aura metamagic. Even more options to deal with, but damn it I wanna know. How much does it cost?

Hovering over the locked out tier 2 section, Rain learned that the cost had increased to 1000 experience, up from 100 for tier 1. Shrugging, he paid the price and unlocked the next set of skills.

Aura Metamagic

Tier 0

Amplify Aura (6/10) Exp: 992/1600
Multiply aura intensity by 160%
Multiply aura mana cost by 220%

Extend Aura (7/10) Exp: 270/2200
Extend aura range by 7 meters
Multiply aura mana cost by 240%

Tier 1

Aura Focus (2/10) Exp: 147/400
Focus on an aura to boost its output
Multiply aura intensity by 140%
Multiply aura range by 140%
Multiply aura mana cost by 140%
User loses all external senses while focusing

Aura Synergy (0/10) (+)
Increase all aura output by 0.1% for each rank in any aura
Requires 1 rank in five different Auras

Tier 2

Prismatic Intent (0/10)
User may maintain 2 auras simultaneously
Requires 10 ranks in Aura Synergy
Requires 1 rank in 15 different auras

Aura IFF (0/10)
User may exempt entities from direct aura effects at will
Selected entities receive 90.0% aura output

Requires 10 ranks in Amplify Aura
Requires 10 ranks in Extend Aura
Requires 10 ranks in Aura Focus

Tier 3

Locked

“YES!” Rain shouted loudly, startling a flock of birds out of a nearby tree. He had immediately jumped up in excitement upon reading the description of prismatic intent, ignoring the protests of his aching body. The skill was exactly what he had been looking for.

“I knew it!” Rain paced excitedly, the stiffness in his legs the only thing preventing him from jumping up and down. The skill windows followed him as he paced, hovering in his field of view as he turned his body. He continued reading, his grin spreading even wider as he read the description of aura IFF.

IFF is... Identification, Friend or Foe? Isn't that a military thing? This is perfect! With that at level 10, I could use refrigerate without worrying about hurting my allies! Holy shit, I need to get both of these asap!

Humm, these requirements are a bit insane. I need to...

“Rain.”

“FUCK!” Rain leapt into the air, landing in a kung-fu pose and whirling to face the source of the noise. He saw Tallheart staring at him through the transparent skill windows. Sheepishly, he swiped them closed and relaxed his arms. He winced at the sudden spasm of pain in his lower back from the unplanned acrobatics. Tallheart was chuckling.

“You did that on purpose,” Rain said accusingly.

“I heard you yell, so I came to see what happened. It was worth it.”

“Did you have to be so quiet?”

“I was not being quiet.”

“*Bullshit!*”

24: Answers

“What were you doing that was more important than watching your surroundings?” Tallheart asked, watching as Rain paced back and forth near the river.

“I was...looking at skills.”

“Humm. Did you level up then?”

“Yes, though...isn't that question... rude? I don't mind, but I thought...”

“Pfft.” Tallheart blew air out through his lips in a derisive snort. “Fel Sadanians. I have no <somethings> about such questions.”

“Fel Sadan... Oh, the people who live in the city? So it is just a local thing?”

“What is?”

“You know, the...rude asking thing. About skills. And levels. That is the word, right? Rude?”

“I will not say all humans are foolish, only most.”

“Oh. In that case...” Rain looked around for his notebook. Spotting it over by the rock, he walked over to pick it up. He almost fell when he bent down to retrieve it, his back spasming painfully.

Tallheart shook his head as he watched Rain flick through the pages. “I will answer one question, but you must come help me with the <something> in return.”

“Only one?” Rain asked. Tallheart's face was stony as he stared back at him. “Fine, fine. I should probably move around anyway.”

“Come. Ask while we walk to the clearing.”

After grabbing his pack, Rain looked over the list of questions he had built up, trying to decide which one he wanted to be answered the most. He skipped over a few that he guessed Tallheart wouldn't know the answer to. Finally, he settled on a question that wasn't even on the list.

“Tallheart, I have a lot of clarity. Like, a lot, a lot. I want to be able to use my skills constantly. I am a...” Rain hesitated before continuing, reluctant to reveal his rare class. “I am a mage but my focus is low. I don't have any other high attributes. I want to know... Is it good? To put all of your attributes into one thing? Or is it better to spread them out?”

“That is a long question.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“You have seen my strength, yes?”

Rain nodded.

“There is your answer.”

“What? Sorry, I don’t understand.”

“My focus is strength. It serves my skills as a smith. Anything else is <something>.”

“But what about recovery? Or endurance? Don’t you need any defense?”

“I am not a warrior.”

“But something could still hurt you, kill you even.”

“If I die, I die.”

“What?! You don’t care if you die?”

“I care. I have my armor. If I spent points on defense, then I would not be as good of a smith as I could have been with more strength.”

“But surely you must have a few points in other things?”

“Some. I was young once, and foolish.”

“I think... I think I agree with you, but I really don’t wanna risk dying over it.”

“Then don’t.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“But how? If I put all my points in clarity, then...”

“Enough. I have answered your question. Focus on what you are good at, and work to correct your weaknesses in other ways. Take my advice, or do not. Now, help me with the <something>.” Tallheart gestured at a pile of rocks as they entered the clearing.

“<Something>? What is that? I don’t know that word.”

Suddenly, Rain heard a voice coming from the direction of the hut.

“Ah, there you are. I need to tell you, this has got to be the worst excuse for a house that I have ever seen.”

“Hello, Jamus,” Tallheart rumbled.

“Jamus! I thought you weren’t going to be back for a week,” Rain said, moving to greet him.

“It was a <something> job. I have the rest of the day free, so I decided to see how you two were doing.”

“We are fine,” Tallheart informed him. “I am building a <something>.”

“What? Tallheart, that is great news!” Jamus exclaimed. “Where is it? What are you going to use it to make?”

“I am making an anvil, first.”

“Tallheart, I could have gotten you an anvil, all you had to do was ask. Where did you find enough iron for an anvil anyway?”

“Rain found it for me.”

“Oh, did he?” Jamus leaned in to peer at Rain, eyeing him curiously. Rain pulled back. The man’s face was very close and it seemed he had been eating something with a lot of garlic in it.

“Yes. You told me to be useful, remember? You know that pick I found in the mine? By the broken wall? That was a skill. I used the same one to find metal for Tallheart.” Rain took another step back. “Sorry, your breath is really... here, let me just...”

He activated his purification aura, boosting it to maximum. He didn’t really need the power, but he was going to take every opportunity to train his metamagic skills. He was in the middle of a conversation, though, so he didn’t add aura focus into the mix this time.

Jamus was giving him a curious look as the waves of purification washed over him. “Rain, has Tallheart been teaching you? The language, I mean.”

“No, why?”

“Well, your speech has gotten much better in just the past few days. It is kind of scary how fast, actually.”

“Really? I don’t think that’s true. I don’t understand a lot of words still.”

“That is true. It is annoying,” Tallheart contributed. Rain shot him a look, watching as the light of the purification aura swirled around his antlers.

“Yes, yes. Of course there are words you don’t know, and your accent’s terrible. That isn’t what I mean,” Jamus continued. “Look, when we met, back in the guild, could you have spoken to me like this? Did you even use proper sentences?”

“No, I suppose not,” Rain admitted.

“And you don’t think that’s odd?”

“Well, I suppose. A little. It has been ages since then, though.”

“No, it hasn’t. You don’t just learn a language in a few weeks, Rain.”

“But I’ve been speaking it every day. I spoke a lot with Tallheart while you were gone.”

“That explains nothing. Tallheart barely speaks. No offense, Tallheart. Just two days ago, you sounded like a four-year-old. How did you do it? Were you <something> the whole time?”

“He said he has a lot of clarity,” Tallheart supplied, looking at Rain curiously.

What’s that got to do with anything?

Rain was about to reply when he was interrupted by a sudden piercing crack and a spike of pain from his hand. He yelled in alarm and canceled his purification aura.

“What the depths was that?!” Jamus cursed, stepping back warily.

“Peace, Jamus. Rain, let me see,” Tallheart said, extending his gauntleted hand.

Rain unclenched his hand and stared down at it. The pain was coming from the finger that had been host to the focus stat ring. The ring was nowhere to be seen, but the source of the pain was obvious. The skin of Rain’s finger was shiny and starting to redden, as if it had been dunked in scalding water. Rain clenched his teeth and hissed as Tallheart took his hand to inspect the damage.

“Humm. This is wrong.”

“Owww, hey, that hurts!” Rain pulled his hand back, clutching it to his chest. “Tallheart, what happened? Why did my ring... die in fire?”

“I think you mean ‘explode’,” Jamus interjected.

“Sure, whatever. But why did it explode? You said it had a few days left, not that it was going to... ah, fuck this hurts.”

“It shouldn’t have. It had three days left, maybe four,” Tallheart said, scratching his chin.

Jamus had bent down and was searching the ground. He came up with the twisted remains of the ring in his hand. The metal looked melted and it had split into several pieces from the force of the detonation. “You are sure about that? What kind of ring was it? Focus? Clarity?” he asked, tossing the pieces away. He patted at the pockets of his robe, searching for something.

“Yes, focus. I’m going to kill that damn shopkeeper. He sold me a... broken ring. I...”

“No, he did not,” Tallheart interrupted. “It was a poor item, but it should not have failed like that. Unless...”

“Tallheart, you don’t think...” Jamus paused. “Rain, how much mana does that aura use? The purification one. I know it’s rude of me to ask, but...”

“I don’t mind telling you. It is something like 70 mana a minute, but closer to 400 when I boost it.”

“Wow, that is...insane.” Jamus looked taken aback.

“What? It does not sound so high to me.” Tallheart rumbled. “He could not have <somethinged> the ring with 400 mana.”

“No, that isn’t it, Tallheart. It isn’t how much mana the skill uses, it’s how often he uses it.”

“He has used it a few times. Not nearly enough to...”

Jamus cut in. “He came with me on a quest and he used that skill at least 50 times over a few days, and usually for longer than he just did. Perhaps if it was only 70 a minute...over four days... No, even then. Rain, what is your mana regeneration?”

“Hummm. I think you are right, Jamus,” Tallheart looked at Rain, considering.

So inquisitive was the look in the mage’s eyes that Rain didn’t see a way out of answering the question. He decided to just tell him. He gave Jamus his hand as he saw that he had retrieved a jar of ointment from one of the pockets in his robe. “Around 500, with my winter aura? Maybe closer to 550?”

“Only 500 a day? That isn’t too unusual I suppose. Can’t be clarity then, it’s gotta be focus. How much do you have? To spend that much mana in four days...” Jamus mumbled to himself as he smeared the soothing ointment on Rain’s fingers.

“No, not 500 a day, 500 an hour. Ow! Hey!”

Rain gasped in pain as Jamus jerked his hand violently in shock.

“Ffff fff five hundred an hour!” Jamus spluttered. Tallheart was staring at Rain, his only reaction a slight tilt of his head.

Feeling compelled to defend himself, Rain wavered, trying to decide if he should just go ahead and tell them about his class.

In for a penny, in for a pound. Here’s hoping this isn’t a mistake...

“It’s because I spent all of my points on clarity. And my class, which I unlocked because of it.”

“<Something>.”

Rain’s eyes widened as Tallheart said the word. It sounded similar to the term for mana regeneration, but had the same conjugation as the simpler classes he had learned the names for, such as ‘warrior’.

I think he just guessed my class...

“Oh, you know about it? *Dynamo*? The class?”

Jamus cut in instead. "It isn't that rare. All of the <something> classes are general knowledge. But Dynamo? Why would you choose that over, say, Animus?"

"<Something> classes? So there are others? What is... <something>?"

"Like 'pure', but more than that. It means size, too. Think of a huge object, but made of all one thing. A *monolithic* class. Now, why did you do it?" Jamus was still staring at him.

"Well... I wanted to use auras, but the mana cost was insane, so I decided to work on regen. I started getting lots of experience from my mana use, so I kept going. At level 5, I got the class and, well, here we are."

"Tallheart, did you know about this?" Jamus whirled on the antlered man. "Don't tell me you encouraged him."

"No, I did not. He told me he had high clarity, but not how high."

Jamus whirled back to Rain, "And what level are you now? No, don't tell me, that is too much. Have you hit your cap yet?"

"I told you, I don't mind about that stuff. I'm level 10. Cap? What cap? Is there a maximum level?"

"You don't know about... no, of course you don't. You must have thought you could just keep leveling like that forever. Reckless."

"No I didn't. I guessed there would be a cap somewhere, like level 100. What do you mean 'my' cap? Is it different for different people? Is that why the townsfolk aren't... Can they become adventurers if they train, or are they... Are people born without..."

"No, no, nothing like that. Everyone starts without the ability to level, but you can change that."

"How?"

"Monsters," Tallheart rumbled.

"Yes, monsters," Jamus elaborated. "When you kill a specific monster, your cap increases to its level. The mage's <something> of <something> says it has to do with essence. When you kill a monster, the essence of the world flows into you and gives you potential."

Rain thought about this for a few seconds, then rejected it. Something wasn't lining up. He decided not to bother with the unknown words and ask about what was really bugging him.

"So if I killed a slime, the cap would go to one? Then I'd just need to kill something at level two or higher to increase it again? Anyone can kill a slime. Why don't..."

"No. Not just any monster. There are special ones, filled with the essence of the world, or so the <something> says. A slime would not do it."

“But I haven’t killed anything like that! Oh... wait.” Rain stopped as he remembered something from his very first day in this world. The musk wolf. When it had died, the dialog had listed its name in blue text, unlike any other monster he had seen since.

“Does it count if someone else kills it? If I’m just in the party?”

“Yes,” Tallheart confirmed.

“But I didn’t even touch the thing!”

“If you were in the party, then it does not matter.”

“Then, what is a party... no, wait, that’s not important right now. If it works in a party, then why don’t people just go hunting them in groups? High-level people could kill them and raise everyone’s cap...”

“People do indeed do that,” Jamus explained, “but essence monsters are very rare. You must have been incredibly lucky to find one on the surface. It was on the surface, right?”

“Yes, in the forest with Hegar and the others. They killed it. It was the same day I got teleported here, I would have had no chance...”

“You were lucky then, to find something at least level 10 up here...”

“It was not luck.” Tallheart interrupted.

“What?” Jamus asked, looking at the antlered man. “What do you mean, not luck? I’ve never seen anything that high-level on the surface.”

“The teleportation,” Tallheart said, by way of explanation.

“You think the <something> from the... It’s true, teleportation magic does attract monsters, but it would have had to have been close... I don’t see how...”

“Jamus, think. Where is Rain from? How far? Did he tell you?”

“Oh. Ohhhh. If the spell was strong enough, a monster could pick up on the <something> from further away. It would be drawn to it. It would have to be at least...”

“Yes,” Tallheart interrupted, “and it would follow the scent. It would have killed Rain if not for this... Hegar person.”

“So he was lucky after all, but only in that he found someone capable of killing the monster before it killed him.”

Rain gulped.

The musk wolf was tracking me? Shit, I would have died instantly. I forgive you for everything, Hegar.

Jamus sighed and pulled out some strips of cloth to bandage Rain's hand. Rain let him work as he silently pondered everything that he had just learned. He flexed his hand once Jamus had finished wrapping his finger. It hurt, but he didn't think there would be any lasting damage. He'd burned himself worse before from a microwaved pizza roll.

Jamus stepped back and nodded to himself.

"Well, at least that explains the language. Sorry for pressing you, Rain."

"The language?"

"It is the overmana, from your class and your high clarity. It helps your mind learn and remember."

The shocked expression on Rain's face must have been exquisite, as Jamus broke out into raucous laughter.

"Wait, overmana... is that like overhealth? It's making me... smarter?"

"Clearly not," Tallheart slapped Rain on the back with a joking laugh. "I will be working on the <something>. Come help when you are done bothering Jamus." He walked off towards the site of his project, leaving Rain and Jamus alone.

I don't know if I like the idea of stats changing my brain... I mean, sure, who wouldn't want to be smarter, but... would I still be... me?

"Don't mind Tallheart. He's right though. It doesn't make you smarter, it just helps your mind <something> things. High-level mages have very good memories, but there's a limit. You are just a bit ahead of the game because of your class and your...build."

"Oh. Still, I don't understand. If people know about dynamo, why doesn't everyone take it? You said there are others? Is there a stamina regen one? You could do the same thing, use skills that take stamina, and level up really fast because of all the experience."

"Some do. You know Jaks from the guild? The man with all the scars? I did a job with him once. I think he's a Vivificant, but I'm not sure. He heals really fast, but the overhealth might not be enough to deal with the... Anyway, yes, there are others with monolithic classes, but most don't make it very far before they hit the cap. At least, not in one of the independent cities. Inside the <something> it's another story."

"Still, aren't they... better? The monolithic classes?"

"Better is <something>. What level was the monster you killed? Do you think you could have killed it alone? As you are now? If you were at your cap, even?"

"No, I don't think I have the damage, or the defense."

Jamus nodded.

“Yes, you see the problem. To keep growing, you need to be able to fight stronger and stronger monsters. You could join a team, but eventually, something could go wrong and you could die. It is risky, doing what you are doing. You really have no defense?”

“I have a strength ring... For a few more days, at least... It isn't going to explode too, is it?”

“Humph. No, that was only because you forced so much mana through the focus one. You overloaded the enchantment.”

“I was thinking of asking Tallheart to make me some armor...”

“It would be a start. I suppose the metal wouldn't interfere with your auras like it does with targeted spells.”

“Wait, metal... interferes with... No, never-mind, later. Tallheart said I should stick to what I am good at. Do you think I can do that? Keep going with just pure clarity? Are there more class unlocks at higher levels?”

“Tallheart might be even crazier than you are. Take his advice at your own risk. As for class selections, there is another one at level 25, but most don't reach it. That is the line between bronze and silver, by the way. You could do it, but... it might not be wise. It certainly wouldn't be safe.”

“I have some ideas about that. I need more mana, though, if I want to make them work. Do you think a few points in focus would stop me from getting an upgrade to dynamo?”

“I don't know. Higher rare classes are **not** common knowledge like the entry level ones.”

“Damn, what about skills? Is there a hidden skill to boost mana?”

“Humm, probably. I know of one that might be perfect for you. It isn't hidden, though, just tier 2.”

“What is it?”

“Magical <something>, tier 2, magical utility. If you have both <something> focus and <something> clarity at level 10, you can unlock it. I'm assuming you already know what those are. It allows the stats to boost each other, partially. Most mages take it as soon as they can. It would let some of your clarity count towards your mana pool, but not your spell damage. It works in the other direction, too, but I don't think you care about that.”

“That's perfect! Ow!” Rain had clenched his hands in excitement and aggravated his injury. He slowly relaxed them and winced at the pulling sensation of the bandage against his burned skin.

“What about other hidden skills? Something that I can get right now? Do you know of any that would help? What are hidden skills, anyway?”

“I don't know many hidden skills, but maybe there are some that would help. I don't know. You'll just have to keep looking.”

Rain looked to where Tallheart was piling more stones. It looked like he'd be fine without his help for a little while.

“Jamus, you said you have all day?”

“Yes, more or less, why? Got something in mind?”

Rain pulled his notebook out of his pack.

“Good. I just have a few questions...”

25: Clay

“Sorry that took so long, Tallheart. I can help you now.”

“Do not apologize, Rain. You kept Jamus busy so I could work in peace. Did you get the answers you wanted?”

“Some of them. What are we building?”

“A <something>. It is to heat the metal.”

“Oh, a forge? Can’t you just use Tel to make it easier to work like before?”

“I could. But then I would not be able to separate the metals.”

“So Tel...what? Bind things together? Is that why people collect them?”

“Yes, and other reasons.”

“But they won’t help here? The shovel came out pretty good.”

“This way is better.”

“Ok, sure, I believe you. So what do you need for the forge?”

“<Something>.”

“Sorry, I don’t know that one.”

“It is like dirt, but not. You can make things with it. Pots. Jars.”

“Oh, *clay*. I know what you mean. What do you need it for?”

“I must seal the stone before I can control the fire.”

“Right, got it. So you want me to find some clay?”

“Yes.”

“I’m on it. Oh, and Jamus wanted to know if it would be ok if he brought someone else out here. You remember I told you about the man I saved? Jamus says he’s awake and wants to thank me.”

“Where is Jamus?”

“He went back to the city. Don’t worry, he said he wouldn’t bring anyone else here without making sure they were ok with cervidians first. He told me he was going to pick up a few things that we needed. He’ll be back later tonight, maybe with a guest.”

“I see,” Tallheart said, face unreadable, “Can you find the clay?”

“I’ll try. Detection should work, probably. I’ll start by the river.”

“Bring something to carry it. The shovel is by the hut.”

Rain walked over to the hut and grabbed the shovel. He left his pack behind, but took the old linen sack that he had gotten from the bizarre merchant in town. He wadded it up and stuffed it into a pocket as he headed off toward the river, gnawing on a ration bar. He was still sore, but the morning of resting his muscles while talking with Jamus had restored him somewhat.

*I feel so much better about my build now. Jamus was a huge help, even if he was a bit skeptical. It’s clarity for me, all the way. I can’t wait until I unlock magical synergy. I found it in tier 2 right where Jamus said it would be. Lets clarity boost total mana, and focus boost mana regen. Intrinsic focus has probably already leveled from all the purification practice while we were talking. Good thing I put a point in that early-on in our conversation. It should level fast because of how much mana I can chew through. Speaking of fast, **velocity**.*

Rain switched to the second skill he had purchased. He hadn’t gotten a chance to test it out yet, but Jamus’s description of what speed did had him excited. It didn’t boost his mind at all, but it would boost all of his movements, not just walking and running. He tucked his ration bar into a pocket and prepared himself, holding the shovel at his side. He flexed his other hand, wincing slightly at the continuing ache of the burn. His muscles were still a bit stiff, but he felt up to some light exercise.

Ok, let’s see how this feels. No boosts, just the base strength of 10% at first.

Immediately after activating the skill, Rain stumbled, dropping the shovel and windmilling his arms. His body felt lighter, his limbs responding quicker and moving more easily than he was used to. It took him a few tries to stop his arms from flailing about; the faster response was causing him to overcompensate. Once he felt he had the hang of it, he started walking, struggling to adapt to the strange sensation. He managed to get back up to a normal walking pace, then broke into a jog.

Small wisps of white light trailed behind his limbs like wind as he moved, a telltale sign that something magical was at work. He couldn’t tell if he was moving faster than he could normally; the bizarre speedup to his limbs was throwing off his form and forcing him to concentrate on not falling over.

I’m going to need to practice this. Even 10% is a bit jarring.

He canceled the skill and turned back to retrieve the shovel from where he had dropped it. He glanced at his mana, seeing that the short skill use hadn’t impacted it too greatly. He was really feeling the loss of the focus ring. The point in intrinsic focus had helped a bit, getting him up to 240, but it was still quite a bit less than the 400 he had gotten used to.

Ok, let’s see how maximum power feels. With amplify and channel mastery, it should be somewhere between 15 and 20 percent. I’m sure as hell not trying aura focus on this one.

Rain activated the skill with the modifiers and started back towards where he had dropped the shovel. The additional boost was noticeable and even more difficult to deal with. He was ready for it this time,

though, so he had less trouble keeping his limbs in control. He made it back to where he had dropped the shovel and left the skill on as he bent to retrieve it. He managed to grab it on his first try, already adapting to the lighter feeling in his arms.

It's kind of like that feeling you get when you've been on a treadmill for a while and then try to walk around. Like I'm gliding or something. Weird.

Rain canceled the skill when he saw his mana was starting to get too low for his comfort. The sudden return of weight to his limbs made him stumble again.

Wow, yeah, coming down's just as bad. This is gonna be tricky to use in combat. Oh, now there's an idea. Jamus said that monsters count as entities, so without aura IFF, this should affect them. Until I unlock that, I can't use it to get a speed advantage, but I might be able to use the disorientation to trip them up. That seems... broken. If I get this up to 100%, I don't see anything being able to just adapt to the sudden change if they aren't expecting it. I wonder if it's possible to resist a 'beneficial' effect. Damn it, I should have brought my notebook. Even if my memory is boosted like Jamus says, I know I'm not going to be able to remember all the questions I'll think up today.

When he reached the river, Rain walked back to his rock, sat, and fished out his ration bar. He was really feeling the loss of the focus ring, as his mana was almost empty from the two brief uses of velocity. Thus, he needed to wait for his mana to regenerate under the influence of his winter aura. As he chewed on the cement-like 'food', he considered what Jamus had said on the subject of physical training.

So the strength skill isn't just some magical boost to my muscles. It is like a cap. With base strength, I can still get stronger by training my body, up to some limit. Strength adds to skill damage for physical skills, but that's a bit of a lie. You won't do maximum damage if your body isn't strong enough to put full force behind the blow. Also, no, I'm not going to turn into the hulk if I put some points in strength. Muscle size doesn't have much to do with actual strength here, other than showing how close you are to your cap. If I was jacked, it would just mean I was close to the limit, whether I had ten strength or ten hundred.

Rain looked down at his arms as he leaned against his rock. He wasn't exactly scrawny, but he felt like an adventurer should have a bit more muscle, just for appearances' sake.

I should do some push-ups or something. Anyway, stats are weird. Endurance and focus work the same way as strength. You have to train your resistance and your mind if you want to get the full benefit from your skills. Endurance governs stamina, so more of it means more running without getting tired. It is related to the body the same way health is, so if your pool is high, you get less tired, physically. If it's low, even getting out of bed will wear you out. Overstamina helps you recover from fatigue. It even reduces your need to sleep, though if you skip out on it entirely you start having other problems. As for the defense bit, it's like building up calluses. More endurance makes your body tougher, but not if you spend all day bathing in rosewater.

Focus is... a bit harder to grasp. Jamus said it wasn't the mind, but your soul that is getting strengthened. I'm not sure if I'm translating that right, but 'soul' is the closest concept I can think of. He said that's why overmana improves memory, but not actual intelligence. Doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Are memories stored in the soul, then? I thought they were just connections between neurons. I

guess I'm not just made of meat after all. Use magic to strengthen your soul, he said. Shouldn't be an issue.

“Claydar, activate!” Rain said, switching to his detection aura and climbing to his feet. “Wow, that sounded even lamer than I thought it would.”

He sent out a single pulse of detection, focusing on clay and using the same combination of modifiers that he had used in his search for metal. He didn't get a response, so he started walking up the river, searching the bank with his eyes. The skill had worked on metal, and he saw no reason for clay to be different, but he decided to search the normal way too, instead of just trusting his aura.

The range of the pulses had improved slightly due to the ranks he had earned in his metamagic, so he left a bit more time between each activation. He smiled as he got a signal on his fourth try.

That was easy.

He walked over to the source of the signal, spotting an undercut section of the bank. Getting down on his hands and knees to peer under it, he found a large deposit of clay waiting to be harvested.

“Nice.”

He pulled out the linen sack from his pocket and rolled the sides down so it would sit flat on the ground near the river. He then pulled off his boots and waded into the water, setting himself up so he could get at the clay with the shovel. The metal shovel blade sunk into it easily, coming away with a heavy load of the grayish river clay. He moved the dripping shovel over the linen sack and inverted it, hearing the clay land with a slime-like plop. He took several more shovel-fulls of clay, then clambered out of the river. He gathered up the sides of the sack and lifted it, testing the weight. The fabric held, so he set down his shovel, satisfied.

This should be enough for Tallheart to get started. I don't want to get more until I know this is the right kind of clay. It seems a bit sandy, but I don't think it should be an issue for what he wants it for.

Rain sat resting near the hut as he watched Tallheart slather clay on the stones he had piled up. He'd made several trips back and forth between the river and the clearing, and had built up a small pile of the stuff for the smith to use. He'd taken it easy to avoid straining his tired muscles, so it took him a few hours of work to get enough clay for Tallheart to complete the forge. Nevertheless, he had activated velocity a few times as he walked, more to get used to the feeling of the skill than to benefit from the minor speed boost. It was also good training for his metamagic, given the fairly high mana usage.

It looked like Tallheart had the forge project well in hand, so Rain decided to just have his supper instead of trying to help further. He pulled out a ration bar from his pack and regarded the solid rectangle unenthusiastically. He'd finished off the last of his beef jerky earlier, leaving him with just the unappetizing bricks in his bag.

I wonder if Tallheart can make actual bricks with that clay. They might be softer. Bleh, I'd kill for a little variety. Maybe I'll go looking for food in the forest tomorrow. I might be able to hunt with detection and refrigerate, though I don't really wanna kill off a huge patch of the forest with ice.

Rain gnawed at the ration bar. Seeing that his mana was almost full again, he activated detection with all of his modifiers. If he was going to do more searching tomorrow, leveling the skill seemed like it would be a good idea. He managed about 6 seconds before his mana ran out and he had to switch back to winter.

Still no headache. Maybe it is a function of the mental training I have been doing by using all these auras? Like muscle soreness, except in the soul? Jamus just needs to work out more. Most mages probably avoid getting all the way down to zero because it takes them so long to regen, whereas I... statistics.

| Statistics | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| | Total | Base | Modifier |
| Health | 400 | 400 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 240 | 240 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 670 /hr | 450 /hr | -17.4/hr 53% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

| Resistances | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

Yeah, I can do that again in 20 minutes. Damn mana pool. Damn ring. Damn adventurer shop guy. Oh well, I'll just pump as much mana out today as I can so intrinsic focus levels like mad. I'm putting all points in clarity from now on, no matter what Jamus says about 'safety'. I can't risk losing my chance at super dynamo or whatever it might be called.

If I want to keep leveling, I need to raise my cap somehow. That means I need to find and fight essence monsters. I have eight levels left, so that's eight skill points to play with. I want to take shear so I can get some physical damage. I wouldn't think that'd be a common resistance, based on how it's not on the defensive aura tree. Plus, it goes through walls, so broken AF! So many opportunities for abuse. I'll need at least one other offensive aura to meet the prerequisite. I'm thinking immolate.

Rain pulled out his notebook and started making a list.

Defensive auras aren't enough, I can't predict what elements I'll encounter, so I can't use my points on those yet. They are pretty useless until I train them up, too. I need to work on that eventually, not now. I'll have to get the well auras instead, at least the stamina and health ones. Those will let me heal mid-combat and the other seasons will help the rest of the time. Essence well would be useful, but only if I have a party. I'll leave it off for now.

Aura synergy I want, if I'm going to be in combat. I want everything to be as strong as possible. With all these other auras, it should start making a noticeable difference. Aura IFF is a must-have, of course. Unless I'm going to go solo, I need to be able to hurt monsters and not my allies.

Lastly, magical synergy, can't forget about that one. I didn't see anything else in tier 2 magical utility that I wanted, so I think that's it.

Rain surveyed his completed list.

Skills for level 18

Immolate
Shear
Spring
Summer
Energy Well
Life Well
Aura Synergy
Aura IFF
Magical Synergy

Damn, that's more than 8. I have to prioritize...

Rain worked through the effects of the various skills in his head, writing numbers next to them to rank them. He had to re-order them a few times before he was satisfied,

Skills for level 18

| |
|-------------------|
| Immolate 1 2 3 |
| Shear 1 2 3 |
| Spring 3 5 |
| Summer 4 |
| Energy Well 3 5 |
| Life Well 4 |
| Aura Synergy 3 6 |
| Aura IFF 1 |
| Magical Synergy 2 |

That should be pretty good. I can't take aura IFF or magical synergy yet because of the requirements, but I'll get them as soon as I can. I'll take immolate next, and train it and refrigerate so I can get shear. That should also help train my metamagic, that way I can power through summer and spring faster. Still probably gonna take a while. Healing is more important than stamina, but running out of either in a fight will get me killed right quick. Sorry aura synergy, you didn't make the cut. Stamina is more important, particularly if I'm with someone who uses it for their skills. I might reconsider when I get there.

Maybe I should just start sticking points in the defensive auras gradually. I'll never get them all at once, not with how the cap works.

Rain finished off his ration bar and slipped his notebook back into his pack. He noted that his mana was full again, so he drained it out with detection. Switching back to winter, he glanced up at Tallheart. The man had started a fire in the middle of the enclosure he had created. It looked like he was going to use the fire to dry out the clay and lock the stones in place, completing the forge.

I wonder where Jamus is. He said he'd be back by nightfall, but the sun is already almost down.

Rain got up and walked over to Tallheart.

"All done? Need anything else?" Rain asked.

"The clay must dry overnight. Build up the fire. I must eat."

"Sure, you got it."

Rain settled down near the flames and started feeding in larger and larger branches. He watched them for a few minutes to make sure the fire was burning strongly. Tallheart had wandered off into the trees, presumably to find something for dinner.

Does he seriously not try to stockpile food? Isn't winter supposed to be coming, or something like that? It sure feels like it's getting colder.

Rain shivered and held out his hands to the fire. He pulled out his notebook after a bit and started reviewing his language notes. Every twenty minutes, he would pause to activate detection or purify. He didn't want to risk using refrigerate. He thought it had a decent chance of putting out the flames or damaging the forge somehow. After around an hour, Tallheart returned and inspected the fire.

“Good,” he rumbled.

“What now?”

“We sleep.”

“I’ll stay up for a little while, Jamus said he would come back.”

“Humph, very well,” Tallheart said. “Use your aura.”

“You got it,” Rain replied, activating purify with all his modifiers. When his senses returned after dropping the skill, Tallheart was already walking away to the hut.

“Goodnight,” Rain called after him.

Tallheart hesitated, then looked back and gave him a nod before ducking into the hut. Rain searched the darkness for any sign of Jamus, shrugged, and moved on to the next page in his notebook.

26: Gratitude

| Training Overview |
|---|
| <u>General Experience Earned</u> |
| Mana Use: 8907 |
| Stamina Use: 17 |
| [Level Up] |
| <u>Skill Experience Earned</u> |
| Extend Aura: 1360 |
| Purify: 2420 [Rank Up] |
| Winter: 191 [Rank Up] |
| Amplify Aura: 2294 [Rank Up] |
| Detection: 1123 [Rank Up] |
| Aura Focus: 334 [Rank Up] |
| Channel Mastery: 192 [Rank Up] |
| Velocity: 993 [Rank Up] [Rank Up] |
| Intrinsic Focus: 8366 [Rank Up] [Rank Up] [Rank Up] [Rank Up] [Rank Up] [Rank Up] [Rank Up] |

Haha, holy shit, I think I broke it. That's a lot of rank up messages. Seven ranks in intrinsic focus in one day? Wow.

Rain swiped the dialog closed and climbed out of bed. He looked over to Tallheart's spot, but the man wasn't there. Shrugging, he ventured out into the chill morning air and headed over to the forge. Tallheart was feeding wood into it to build the fire back up. Rain pulled up a log to sit on near the flames while he warmed himself. It hadn't rained, but there was a layer of dew over everything and it looked like it was going to be a cold day.

I need a cloak or something.

"Good morning, Tallheart."

"Rain."

"Is the forge done?"

"No."

"Can I help?"

"Not with this. Can you find more metal?"

"I want to stick around here and wait for Jamus. He didn't show up last night. Maybe I'll go look later."

"Very well."

“I’ll just sit here, if that won’t bother you.”

“It does not bother me, you are welcome.”

“Thanks.”

It was a little hard to get a read on Tallheart, but Rain thought he was in a good mood. His curt responses didn’t bother him at this point; he knew that it was just how the man spoke.

Rain used purify to freshen himself up and started peeling off the bandage from his finger. The skin was tender, but not nearly as painful as it had been the day before. He tucked the clean bandage into a pocket; it would be useful if he got hurt again, and purify took care of any sanitary concerns. He pulled up his attributes window to see the impact of yesterday’s training.

| Attributes | |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| Richmond Rain Stroudwater | |
| Level 11 | |
| Experience: 4005/7304 | |
| Dynamo | |
| Health | 400 |
| Stamina | 200 |
| Mana | 520 |
| | |
| Strength | 20 [10] (+) |
| Recovery | 10 (+) |
| Endurance | 10 (+) |
| Vigor | 10 (+) |
| Focus | 10 (+) |
| Clarity | 120 (+) |
| | |
| Free Points | 10 |

Wow, that was a lot of experience. What is up with the requirement for the next level? I can’t figure out the formula ever since I took dynamo. It’s going up, that’s for sure. Ten free points, right into clarity, thank you very much.

As Rain applied the points, a number caught his eye and made him do a double take.

*520 mana? Yes! Go intrinsic focus! Stat ring, you’ve been replaced! **Statistics.***

| Statistics | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| | Total | Base | Modifier |
| Health | 400 | 400 | 0 0% |
| H.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Stamina | 200 | 200 | 0 0% |
| S.Regen | 100 /day | 100 /day | 0 0% |
| Mana | 520 | 520 | 0 0% |
| M.Regen | 858 /hr | 487 /hr | -28/hr 82% |

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Movement Speed | 10 |
| Perception | 10 |

| Resistances | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Heat | Cold | Light | Dark |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |
| Force | Arcane | Mental | Chemical |
| 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% | 1 0% |

“Yeah!”

Rain pumped his hand in the air at the sight of his total mana regeneration. The boost from winter was really starting to make a difference, almost doubling the base rate. Tallheart looked at him and raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment.

“Sorry, I just got a little excited,” Rain said, settling himself back down on the log.

“I understand. I remember what it was like to level up.”

“Remember? Are you... capped?”

“Yes. I have not leveled for years.”

“Oh. You should go find one of those monsters.”

“I am not a warrior.”

“So you’ve said. I could help you, once I’m strong enough. What level are you, if you don’t mind telling me?”

Tallheart stared at Rain with a contemplative expression, then nodded.

“I trust you, but do not tell others. It is dangerous, for a cervidian’s level to be known. I have your word?”

“You have it.”

“I am level 37.”

“Wow, that’s really high. How did you kill something that strong if you don’t fight?”

“My wife helped me.”

“Oh, so she’s a fighter, is she...”

Tallheart stared into the flames, silently.

“Shit, sorry,” Rain apologized. There was a pained expression on Tallheart’s face.

“It was a long time ago.” The antlered man shook his head and sighed, picking up a larger log and adding it to the fire.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Tallheart said as he got to his feet. “Do not let the fire go out,” he continued as he started off toward the river.

Rain winced. He’d really put his foot in it. He’d have to make it up to Tallheart later, but for now he sensed that the man wanted to be alone. He stared at the fire, dwelling on the tragedy that was Tallheart’s life.

What the hell happened to his people? Dangerous for his level to be known? Why?

Rain shook his head and shivered. He pulled his log closer to the fire and then brought up his skills menu to distract himself.

Skills

Refrigerate (4/10) Exp: 356/700

29-34 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 4 meters

Cost: 20 mp/s

Extend Aura (7/10) Exp: 1630/2200

Extend aura range by 7 meters

Multiply aura mana cost by 240%

Purify (8/10) Exp: 1955/2900

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 8 meters

Cost: 80 mp/min

Winter (4/10) Exp: 112/700

Multiply M.Regen by 140% for all entities

Range: 4 meters

Cost: 4 mp/hr

Intrinsic Clarity (10/10)

Multiply base mana regeneration by 300%

Amplify Aura (7/10) Exp: 1686/2200

Multiply aura intensity by 170%

Multiply aura mana cost by 240%

Detection (6/10) Exp: 792/3200

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 0.50 meters

Range: 6 meters

Cost: 6 mp/s

Aura Focus (3/10) Exp: 81/800

Focus on an aura to boost its output

Multiply aura intensity by 160%

Multiply aura range by 160%

Multiply aura mana cost by 160%

User loses all external senses while focusing

Channel Mastery (2/10) Exp: 148/400

Allows intuitive control of channeled skill intensity

Minimum skill intensity: 80%

Maximum skill intensity: 120%

Skill mana cost modified by intensity adjustment

Intrinsic Focus (8/10) Exp: 2066/2900

Multiply base mana by 260%

Velocity (3/10) Exp: 393/800
30% boost to speed for all entities
Range: 3 meters
Cost: 3 mp/s

Free Skill Points: 1

This... is getting a little unmanageable. If I get many more skills, I'll have to see if I can reorganize the display. I don't feel like messing with settings right now, so I'll just live with it. Pretty good progress overall.

What should I work on today? Humm. The wells are a bit out of reach until I get aura focus and channel mastery higher, so I guess I'll work on offense. It's way too cold to use refrigerate, so I'll take immolate and train with that instead. Should help me warm up, at least.

After spending the point on the skill, Rain considered the forge. He was unsure if he would damage it by adding to the heat of the fire. To be safe, he got up and moved a few meters away.

*This should be good. I won't use extend, so the range will be pretty short. **Immolate.***

When he activated the skill, immediately he felt his mana warm as it flowed through his veins and out into the world. A hot wind blasted forth from his skin and made the grass in a circle around him wave slightly. He couldn't feel the heat directly, but the dew on the grass was quickly drying. He canceled the aura after around ten seconds and bent down to inspect the grass. The area around him in a one-meter radius was dry, the dew burned away. The ground was slightly warm to his touch, as if the sun had been shining on it all day. It felt nice against his cold skin.

Good, I'm not going to set the forest on fire. Well, not at rank one anyway. What if I push it?

He activated the skill again, using amplify and channel mastery to boost it. He left off aura focus, not wanting to be without senses should he inadvertently set his pants on fire. The hot wind gusted out, noticeably stronger this time. Rain watched as the grass started yellowing and drying out. He left the skill on for another thirty seconds until his mana started to get low.

Good, no fire. I can practice this here; I just need to be careful. Now that the grass is dried out, it might burn if I do that again.

Rain started pulling up the dead grass as he waited for his mana to regenerate, piling it on the dirt in front of him. Once he had cleared the entire circle, he sat back down in the center and checked his mana. It was nearly full again, so he re-activated the skill. This time, he used focus as well.

He was able to hold it for around 20 seconds. The smell of burned grass greeted his nose as his senses returned. The pile in front of him was blackened and smoldering, having been ignited by the heat. Additionally, a circle of grass outside of the dirt ring was now dried and yellow.

Oops, I forgot about the range boost of aura focus. At least that grass was still wet. Even if it did catch on fire, the rest of the grass is probably wet enough so it wouldn't spread that far. I... need to be really careful with this.

Rain eyed the burned pile of grass, then fingered the hem of his shirt contemplatively.

My clothes aren't burned. Huh, they're barely even warm. I guess the skill makes an exemption for things I'm wearing. Why? Purify doesn't do that. I'm not complaining, though. I like wearing clothes. Still, I expected it to be stronger than this. Refrigerate can kill a slime, easy, so why does immolate take so long just to kill grass? Refrigerate is higher level, true, but... Slimes must really suck if they are weaker than grass. What does that say about me?

Anyway, I can't use this willy-nilly. I kinda get where the Watch is coming from. Once this is all leveled up and stuff, I could accidentally burn down a city block if I used it without thinking. That explains why they take such a hard line with magic. I'm not sure if I'm mad at them anymore. Sure, they kicked me out of the city, but that was second-hand information they were working on. That big blue bastard though, him I'm not going to forgive.

How the hell am I going to get back in the city if there are no monsters around here to farm for Tel? The only places I can think of are the sewer, which I can't get to, and that mine, which would probably get me killed. There were slimes in the forest where I started, but not many. Maybe I could try there. I'll ask Jamus if he knows any good farming spots.

Rain pulled out his notebook to write down the question, then started looking through his notes while he waited for his mana to regenerate.

“Hello! Tallheart! Rain! You there?”

Rain looked up at the sound of the voice. He was waiting for his mana to recover after his latest bout of immolation. He'd been practicing for the last few hours, and Jamus's voice came as a welcome distraction. Just sitting and using his aura was hardly exciting, and Tallheart had yet to return.

“Over here!” he called out, climbing to his feet.

He saw the brilliant orange of Jamus's robe break through the trees into the clearing. The man standing next to him was much less visible in his tattered black outfit. Rain walked over to join them, leaving the circle of scorched earth behind.

“Hi Jamus,” he said, then turned to the other man. “Val, are you ok? I was really worried about you. Sorry, I couldn't get them to heal you.”

“Don't apologize. I owe you my life,” the man replied in a firm voice, stepping forward and offering Rain his hand to shake. When Rain moved to take it, the man reached past his hand, grasping his forearm instead. Rain did likewise. The man released him and stepped back.

“Don't worry about it. Anyone would have done the same.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Val stated flatly.

Rain had no response to this, but luckily Jamus cut into the awkward silence.

“Sorry we were late, Rain, there was some news in the city. It caused a bit of a commotion in the guild. By the time it all calmed down, it was too late to head out here.”

“Don’t worry about it. What was the news?”

“The <something> of Adamant declared <something> on the <something> kingdoms.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Oh, right, most of those words haven’t come up. Here, I got you something.”

Jamus pulled out a large, leather-bound book from a bag that he had slung over his shoulder. He handed it to Rain for him to inspect. Taking it, Rain flipped open the cover, revealing page after page of hand-written script. From the layout, it appeared to be some sort of dictionary.

Damn, I wish I could read.

Rain peered closer at the page. He’d been practicing with his notes and he thought that he had most of the alphabet down, but it was still going to take him quite a while to decipher the cramped text.

“Oh, wow. Thanks, Jamus. It’s written by hand... This wasn’t expensive?”

“I know a guy. Don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks,” Rain said, tucking the book under his arm.

Jamus shifted to adjust the bag on his back, then looked around the clearing. “Where’s Tallheart? I have a few other things I want to give you guys.”

“Down by the river, I think.”

“I’ll go find him and leave you two to catch up. I’ll just put this stuff over by the... hut.”

Jamus walked off and left Rain and Val standing awkwardly in the clearing. Rain inspected the man surreptitiously. In the mid-morning light, he could see that he was in good shape, despite the mage’s robes he was wearing. He didn’t share the spindly build that he had come to associate with Jamus and other mages. In fact, even calling the black tattered garment a robe was a bit inaccurate. It was more like a long trench-coat, but without the buttons. The man had dark skin and his straight black hair was still tied into a ponytail as it had been in the sewer.

“So, you... live out here?” Val said, sizing Rain up in turn.

“For now. I got banned from the guild.”

Val raised a hand to touch the copper plate hanging from his own neck, then dropped it. “So Jamus said. Something about magic in the city?”

“Right. I pissed off the Watch, even though it was a harmless spell.”

“Which one?”

“Purify, the one I was using in the sewer. This one.”

Rain activated the skill to demonstrate, the pulses of white light visible even in the sunlight, thanks to the increased strength of his skills. Val took a cautious step back, then relaxed, letting the light wash over him.

“Were you? I don’t really remember that much after I hit my head. So, you’re a mage, then? What does it do, purify?”

“It...cleans things. The skill description says it works on poison too, but I haven’t ever tested that.”

“That’s convenient. Wish I’d had that when I went down there.”

“What were you doing in the sewer, anyway?”

“I was trying to kill that damn giant slime. Thing had way too much health.”

“Giant slime? The one from the quest in the middle of the board? They let you go after it alone?”

“Nobody tried to stop me. Wish they had. I guess I look stronger than I am.”

“So you’re a mage too? What was that light spell?”

“Lunar orb. It isn’t good for much, other than making light. Still, I need it, for my build.”

“What build? Oh, I’m being rude, sorry.”

“A little. Don’t worry about it. You saved me, so I owe you. Can I trust you to keep quiet about what I’m about to tell you?”

Rain nodded.

“Good. I know of a rare class, including the <something> requirements. I am trying to unlock it, so I need to pick some really specific skills.”

“Oh, I see,” Rain said, debating whether to tell the man about his own rare class. He decided against it for now. He really didn’t know anything about him, other than the fact that he was some sort of mage. *I’ll get to know him a bit better, first.*

“So you went after the slime to, what, earn money? Experience?” Rain asked.

“Neither. I need to kill a strong essence monster, and I’d hoped that the slime would be one. It wasn’t, but by the time I found that out, it had already blocked the tunnel behind me.”

“An essence monster?”

“Yes. It’s a requirement for the class I want. I’m stuck at level 5 until I pick something. I’m not taking mage, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, so it’s not just the cap? You can’t level until you pick?”

“Right.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. It never even occurred to me to not pick right away. Shit. Thanks for telling me about it.”

“Thanks for saving me. Is there anything I can do to pay you back?”

“Well... I do need Tel to get back into the city...”

“Sorry, I’m flat broke. I lost what little coin I had in the sewer. In fact, I was hoping that I could join you out here so I don’t have to pay for lodging. I’m not from around here, and I don’t fancy hunting slimes so I can afford the bunkroom.”

“Sure, I’ll have to talk to Tallheart, though. This is his hut, though I suppose we did kind of build it together.”

“Stick to being a mage.”

“I know, right?”

“Tallheart is the cervidian?”

“Yeah, did Jamus tell you about him? Is that going to be an issue?”

“No. I have no problem with his kind, as long as he doesn’t have a problem with me.”

“Oh, good. Well, then, I’m sure he won’t mind...”

Rain stood awkwardly as Val looked around the clearing.

“Should we go find him?” Val asked.

“No, I think it would be better if we let him talk to Jamus for a little while.”

“Then what should we do while we wait? What were you doing before I got here?”

“I was just training my magic.” Rain waved at the burned circle of grass.

“Fire mage, then?”

“No, I am... an aura mage, I guess. I use auras. It isn't my 'class' class.” Rain made air-quotes with his fingers to explain what he meant, but this just got him a puzzled look.

“I don't think I've ever heard of that one before. There are some aura users in the <something>, but they're more... humm. They aren't adventurers, let's say.”

“The <something>? Jamus said that word before. Sorry, I'm not from around here either. This isn't my first language.”

“Yeah, Jamus told me that you were a bit... different. Your accent is pretty strange, that is for sure.”

“What did he say?”

“Just that you were quick at learning languages, and that you were from somewhere, very, very, *very* far away. His words.”

“Ah, yeah. That's accurate. I was teleported here, I don't know how.”

“Hell of a thing. So, training, huh? Fancy a bit of a spar? You don't seem like you're too much higher level than I am.” Val looked at him expectantly.

“I don't know... My magic isn't really good for that kind of thing.”

“Ok, what then?”

“How about if we go hunting? All I have to eat are ration bricks.”

“I can't eat those damn things. Your bartender... Khurt? Was that his name? Anyway, he's <something> for making them like that. I didn't believe Jamus when he said they were your favorite food. He has a stack of them for you, by the way.”

Rain scoffed. “Don't listen to Jamus. I don't eat them because I like them.”

“Hah. I knew he was full of shit. Well, I'm up for it. What are we hunting?”