

143: Care

Progression Tracker [0.6.0]
marker_1: predelve [21st Fallow]
marker_2: welcometothejungle [21st Fallow]
span: 8.4 hours

Synchronization
Strength: 5.3 -> 6.4 (+1.1)
Vigor: 5.8 -> 5.9 (+0.1)
Focus: 12.2 -> 14.6 (+2.4)

Slots	Accolade	Bonus
4 [2x2]	The Ice Cavern	+40 Strength
4 [4x1]	The Halls of Corruption	+40 Focus
3	The Lair of Embers	+1,000 Heat Resistance
3	We Can't Just Call It 'The Lair'	+200 Force Resistance
2 [1x2]	The Solar Temple	+400 Stamina
2	Southshore Rat Warren	+1,000 Health
1	Everdeep Fortress	+10 Perception

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
22,749	22,750	1,654,832

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
Health	2,800	2,800	400/d
Stamina	204	1,000	500/d
Mana	11,666	11,700	2.4/s

Attributes

200/180	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	ACCLD	MISC	SYN
STR	11.5	90	10	40	40/40	12.8%
RCV	19.6	40	10	0	30/30	49.0%
END	12	30	10	0	20/20	40.0%
VGR	29.5	50	10	0	40/40	59.0%
FCS	35	120	10	40	70/193	29.2%
CLR	200	200	200	0	0/179	100.0%
PER	8.4	20	10	10	0/0	42.0%
SPD	9.4	10	10	0	0/1	94.0%

Resistances

1940/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	1543.0	0%
COLD	543.0	0%
LIGHT	3.0	0%
DARK	3.0	0%
FORCE	633.0	0%
ARCANE	43.0	0%
CHEMICAL	493.0	0%
MENTAL	3.0	0%

1.1 Strength, 0.1 Vigor, and 2.4 Focus in less than eight hours? I'm surprised I haven't been banned by now.

Rain's smile was visible by the flickering light of an evertorch, jammed into a crack in the tunnel wall. Ameliah's Lunar Orb hovered up near the ceiling, supplementing the flames with a pale white glow. She and Tallheart were both asleep, or soon to be. Other than the soft sound of their breathing, the passage was deathly silent. Rain's turn on watch would consist of keeping his ears open and monitoring his Detection macro, which was set to high power and a short interval. Nothing was going to sneak up on him, no matter that he couldn't see beyond their flickering pool of illumination.

His smile turned to a slight frown as he glanced at his stamina. It was at 204/1,000. That was the real cost of pushing himself with the accolades. The hunger was a mere annoyance by comparison.

I don't want to ask Ameliah to refill me. One, gaining stamina like that causes soulstrain; two, I'll never get sync that way; and three, she needs it herself. She's playing accolade games too.

He shifted slightly, his body already feeling stiff from being immobile. *Let me see what I can do here.*

With a minor effort, Rain removed the two accolades of the Solar Temple, replacing them with the two from Sharpton's Delving. In so doing, he traded 400 max stamina—useless at the moment—for 400 stamina regeneration per day. It was unclear what effect, if any, this would have on his sync training, but he'd find out eventually. After some deliberation, he then removed all four of his Focus accolades as well. Just because he hadn't noticed any side effects from the meteoric rise of his Focus sync, it didn't mean there weren't any. He couldn't rely on his Dynamo status to protect him forever; stupidly-high Clarity only went so far. He'd put them back on after they were done resting.

Taking advantage of the freed slots, he added the two accolades of the Everburn, giving himself yet more stamina regen. They weren't as efficient as the Sharptons, but there wasn't anything else he particularly needed at the moment. So the last two slots wouldn't go to waste, he added a pair of Recovery accolades. They were crap-tier in terms of slot efficiency, but every little bit helped.

Rain sighed.

I should have asked them for their Everdeep Fortress accolades. Those would have been pretty damn handy on watch. I'm not getting much Perception sync, now that I think about it. The special stats must increase slower. That, or I'm not training them properly. Maybe I should try looking with my eyes and hearing with my ears.

Rain smiled as he scanned the darkness, thinking of a certain Braavosi.

Man, it's such a shame Syrio died in book one. I wonder if Winds of Winter has a release date yet. He snorted softly. Who am I kidding? Doesn't matter, anyway. It's not like I'll ever get to read it.

...

And now I've made myself sad.

Rain shook his head, returning his eyes to his interface. *I should finish this up.*

Detection had been quiet this whole time, as had the tunnel itself, but there was no call to get complacent. As preposterous as it sounded, he was technically responsible for Ameliah and Tallheart's safety while they slept. That was something he took very seriously.

Am I happy with this?

Slots	Accolade	Bonus
4 [2x2]	The Ice Cavern	+40 Strength
3	The Lair of Embers	+1,000 Heat Resistance
3	We Can't Just Call It 'The Lair'	+200 Force Resistance
2 [1x2]	The Fire Well	+10 Recovery
2 [1x2]	Sharpton's Delving	+400 S.Regen
2 [1x2]	The Everburn	+200 S.Regen
2	Southshore Rat Warren	+1,000 Health
1	Everdeep Fortress	+10 Perception

Yes, I think I am. Now, for the ring. He shifted his gaze to his status page, then started shuffling points around. It's high time I started pushing my physical tolerances again. I'll lose my nice round numbers, but Dozer-me will just have to deal with it.

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

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RCV	12.3	70	10	10	50/30	24.5%
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VGR	29.5	70	10	0	60/40	59.0%
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PER	8.4	20	10	10	0/0	42.0%
SPD	9.4	10	10	0	0/1	94.0%

Resistances

1940/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	1545.0	0%
COLD	545.0	0%
LIGHT	5.0	0%
DARK	5.0	0%
FORCE	635.0	0%
ARCANE	45.0	0%
CHEMICAL	495.0	0%
MENTAL	5.0	0%

There, that should do. I won't regenerate much stamina before third bell, but it's something. My mana cap is low, too, but that's fine. If something comes, all I need to do is wake the others up. I could probably fight whatever it was off, but I'd wake them anyway in the process, so there's no sense worrying about it.

Smiling, he closed his interface, then scanned the darkness again. All remained still and silent. His senses flickered out for a second as Detection pulsed. It, too, found no danger within a hundred meters, and he sighed as his hearing returned.

And now I have nothing to do.

"Come on!" Ameliah yelled, dragging Rain after her by the wrist as she sprinted down the tunnel.

"Slow down!" Rain yelled back.

Ameliah shook her head. She couldn't slow down, or HE would catch them. The clicking sound of many legs on stone grew louder as their pursuer closed the distance. There was a sharp corner ahead, but she didn't slow down. Rain screamed in terror as she activated Redirection. There was a shriek of twisting metal, and then she felt Rain's weight behind her suddenly vanish. In growing horror, she looked down at the arm still held in her hand, then over her shoulder to see Rain crashing into the tunnel wall. Her skill had been disrupted by his armor, and she'd...

Rain gasped as he rebounded from the wall, leaving a bloody smear. His helmet tumbled away as if in slow motion, and he turned to look at her, pain and betrayal in his eyes.

"Rain!" Ameliah screamed, scrambling to reverse her direction, but she found no traction on the stones. Something had gone wrong with her spell. The tunnel was now a shaft, and she could feel the relentless hand of gravity pulling her down.

She was falling.

She clutched Rain's severed arm to her chest, then used Redirection again. As before, the armor twisted her magic. The spell, instead of sending her back toward him, redoubled the speed of her fall. "No!"

Redirection! Redirection!

With each use, her speed only increased, the walls of the shaft becoming a blur. Purple light blossomed in the darkness below, and she looked down to see a mesh of Arcane magic, like vines of pure energy, stretching from wall to wall. The strands wrapped themselves around her body as she plummeted through them, cocooning her before she crashed into the bottom of the shaft with a heavy thump that blasted the air from her lungs. The clicking sound returned, the gigantic spider mount of her pursuer closing in on her as it ran down the wall. She struggled to rise, but couldn't. Her arms were pinned to her sides by the webbing, and she could still feel the multiplied gravity trying to crush her into the stones.

"No!" she gasped in terror as a large hairy leg entered her vision. There was a thump as the rider dismounted, his dark leather boots landing right in front of her.

"Nice try," Anton said, kneeling to grin at her with blood running down his chin. He picked up Rain's arm from where it had fallen next to her, then bit off a pair of the fingers. His sharpened teeth tore through the metal gauntlet like it was paper. "Leaving him behind as a distraction was a good idea, but I'm so very hungry. You shouldn't have brought this part with you." He took another big bite, devouring the rest of Rain's hand. "I just had to come and get the rest of my meal." He licked his bloody lips in satisfaction. "Mmm. He was made of such tender meat. I wonder, will you be just as soft, or will you be tough and stringy? I guess I'll find out."

Ameliah screamed, closing her eyes and curling in on herself as she felt the bands of magic squeezing her tighter and tighter. *No! It's a dream! Just a dream!*

The pressure broke, and she gasped as her eyes shot open. She catapulted herself into a sitting position, her eyes searching the tunnel frantically as her heart pounded in her chest.

"Hey," Rain said urgently, wrapping his arms around her. He wasn't wearing his armor, and his body felt warm and comforting. "It's okay. I'm here. You were just having a nightmare."

Ameliah sobbed wordlessly, hugging back with all of her strength. There was a sound like snapping wood along with the wet squelch of something warm and hot as it slapped against the side of her neck. She stared at Rain's heart in horror as it tumbled to the stones, pulped after being forced up and out through his mouth.

She wailed in horror, her eyes opening for real as she thrashed against the entanglement of her blanket. Moments later, she felt her hand crash into something hard with considerable force.

"Oof," Rain said, falling on his butt with a metallic clank. He shook his head, then pushed himself back up and reached out to her.

Ameliah scrambled away from his hand, getting to her feet. She felt her back press against the tunnel wall, and she froze, her heart hammering in her chest. "Stay back," she hissed, fighting for breath. "Don't touch me."

"Woah," Rain said, raising his hands, aborting his attempt to follow her. "Shh. It's okay. You're awake." He slipped off his helmet, then set it on the ground carefully before getting to his feet.

Ameliah looked around, spotting Tallheart lying on the stones beneath his own blanket with his eyes closed. Rain approached cautiously, and she didn't stop him as he brushed her hair away from her face. She locked up once more as he wrapped her in a hug.

"Hey, everything's fine," he said, pressing his head against her neck. He pulled back after a moment when she didn't respond, holding her by the shoulders as he peered into her eyes. "Are you okay?"

Ameliah nodded, slowly beginning to relax. "It was just a dream." She sighed, then wrapped her arms around his armored back, not squeezing with any real force. She knew how to control her strength. She would never hurt him like that. Never. She clenched her jaw, realizing that she was trembling. *It was just a dream.*

"Do you want to talk about it?" Rain asked softly as he returned her embrace.

Ameliah would have sighed, but she couldn't. The force of his hug was crushing, and obviously not because he intended it to be. Ameliah didn't mind—if anything, she found the pressure soothing, like a heavy blanket—but she had been meaning to talk to him about this for a while. If it meant discussing her own fears, so be it. She inhaled sharply, overpowering his hold on her lungs.

"Rain," she said with her hard-won air. "You're crushing me."

"Shit, sorry!" Rain recoiled as if burned. "I—"

"Shh," Ameliah hissed. "You'll wake Tallheart."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled in agreement from his position on the floor, not opening his eyes, though he was *clearly* awake. Both of them looked at him and smiled, Ameliah feeling a small measure of her tension drain away.

"Come here," she said, letting herself sink down the wall. Rain joined her, listening with growing horror on his face as she described her dream in gory detail. Most of it had already faded from her mind, but she remembered enough to paint a vivid picture.

"I...Ameliah. That's horrible," Rain said when she was finished. He moved to touch her, then flinched back as if afraid. She had no words to describe how much that small motion hurt her.

Rain didn't miss her reaction. "Hey, no," he said quickly, reaching around her shoulder and pulling her close. "I'm not afraid of you. I could never be afraid of you. Now that you've got me thinking about it, I'm afraid of myself. I've got the ring at max, and my control isn't anywhere as good as yours." He shook his head. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled deeply, sitting up at last. "It is a fear that all awakened must deal with, particularly those who have invested in Strength. Neither of you can truly understand. Not as I do."

"Yeah," Rain said, an ashen cast over his features.

Ameliah nodded as Rain released her. *Tallheart is so far beyond us there, we might as well be made of reeds.* She looked down at her hands. "You need to be careful. Always."

"Right," Rain said, making her look up. "World of thick paper."

"Hmm?" Tallheart asked, tilting his head.

Rain glanced at him. "It's a reference to a famous scene in a show from my world. A superhero is talking about how fragile everything is and how he always has to be ridiculously careful so he doesn't hurt someone."

"A superhero," Ameliah said, forcing a smile onto her face. "Like Florida Man?"

Rain choked, then began to laugh. "No, nothing like Florida Man," he managed once he recovered. "I was talking about Superman. I haven't told either of you about him yet, but he's pretty much THE superhero, depending on who you ask. He's absurdly strong and just kinda good at everything to the point that they had to give him a random weakness to keep his stories from being boring. He'd be like...gold, I guess, to give you a frame of reference, maybe platinum. I'm hardly an expert. The comic lore runs deep."

"Ah," Ameliah said.

Rain sighed. "Anyway, I know I need to be careful. It's obvious with my magic—the Watch assigned me a rating and everything—I'm just not used to being superhumanly strong. I need to actively use spells, which makes remembering to be careful easy. Strength is always there, whether I'm punching someone or just shaking their hand. It's only going to get worse with how fast my sync is improving. I can't even take the accolades off to slow down my growth, not without lowering my health." He smiled. "It doesn't help that you're both so ridiculously strong. I feel weak when I'm around you two. Like a kitten."

Ameliah laughed, smiling as she reached up to tousle his hair, which was a bit flat from being crushed beneath his helmet. "A fluffy kitten."

"Hey," Rain said, turning slightly red. "You're embarrassing me in front of Tallheart."

"Your displays of affection do not bother me," Tallheart said, sounding amused. "Now, kiss."

"Tallheart!" Rain gasped, turning even redder.

Ameliah laughed. Teasing Rain was an activity she and Tallheart could both enjoy. It was adorable how shy he could be when others were watching. She decided to show mercy and

got to her feet, taking a deep breath and doing her best to push the last vestiges of her dream from her mind. "We should go back down. I'm fully recovered. The headache is all gone."

"Hmm," Tallheart rumbled, looking at her skeptically from his position on the ground. "Are you sure? It is not yet third bell."

Ameliah nodded. "I'm sure. Removing the accolades helped. I'm going to leave them off for the rest of the day." She looked at Rain. "And I'm going to make him do all the hard work."

"Huh?" Rain asked.

"I said I would let you fight, didn't I?" Ameliah said, offering him her hand. She shook her head as she pulled him to his feet. "No more coddling. You'll be fine with Refrigerate, and it's not like I won't be there to save you if something nasty shows up. I decided I don't want to mess with my build, so that means it's your job to deal with the fire jungle."

Rain was grinning by the time she finished. "The Ashen Jungle, you mean."

Ameliah raised an eyebrow.

"The biome," Rain elaborated. "I'm calling it the Ashen Jungle. From the color of the leaves. Tallheart says every good biome needs a name."

Tallheart nodded. "It is true."

"Just give me a few minutes to put my accolades back on and refill my mana," Rain said hurriedly. He sat next to his pack and closed his eyes, but opened them again after barely a

moment as he stretched to grab his helmet. "Keep watch, will you?" He said, gesturing up the tunnel toward the surface. "There was a monster up there an hour ago. It didn't come down, so I didn't wake you. Other than that, it's been surprisingly quiet."

"Okay," Ameliah said, watching him slip the helmet on. "We'll keep watch."

Rain nodded back, then closed his visor and went silent. Ameliah felt Winter sharpen, then return to normal after a moment as he excluded her and Tallheart from the full effect. He knew that they found it uncomfortable.

I need something to take my mind off that horrible dream. She glanced at Tallheart. "Do you want to play a game of ranks while we wait? I saw a board in Rain's pack."

"Mmm," Tallheart said in agreement, but he shook his head. "I would play, but I do not believe we will have sufficient time. Perhaps tonight."

Ameliah nodded, then blinked as she noticed a small object sitting on the ground. It was a padlock, she realized. She knelt to pick it up, then looked around, spotting a small hooked piece of metal discarded nearby. She smiled. *I guess Rain got bored while he was on watch. At least he wasn't reading.*

She grabbed the lock pick, then stood and inserted it into the lock and wiggled it around. Nothing exciting happened in response to this, so she frowned. *How is this supposed to work, anyway?*

Time passed, and before Ameliah knew it, Rain was lifting his visor. He looked up at her, smiling as he saw the lock in her hand and the frustrated expression on her face. "Problems?" he asked.

Ameliah sighed. "I can feel things moving around in there, but I can't get it to open."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, having been watching her struggles with silent, unhelpful interest.

"Hmm," Rain said, looking around. "Well, your first problem is you need to tension the core. He shifted, picking something up from beneath him. He got to his feet and held it out to her. "You stick this in the keyway, then apply tension so the pins don't drop back down when you set them with the pick."

"Oh, so you were sitting on what I needed," Ameliah said, taking the piece of metal. "Now I feel like an idiot."

Rain smiled. "You're not an idiot. I can't imagine picking locks is anything you'd ever have needed to bother with. Besides, I haven't gotten it open either, and I was messing with it for a good hour. I'm starting to think that that particular lock doesn't work how I think it does. Either that, or lock picking is way harder than the *internet* led me to believe." He chuckled, raising his hands and wiggling his metal-clad fingers. "Though I'm not exactly making things easy on myself."

"No, I suppose you aren't," Ameliah said with a wry smile. She shook her head, then held the lock and picks out to him. "Well, I give up. We have real work to do."

"Right," Rain said, taking them and tucking them away into his pack. He got to his feet slowly, then stretched. "What's the plan?"

"You tell me," Ameliah said.

Rain frowned, considering. "Tallheart, any recommendations?" he asked, turning to look at him.

"Hmm," Tallheart said. "Return to the clearing. Kill everything that challenges you."

Ameliah smiled, enjoying Rain's reaction to that statement. "Works for me."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, donning his mobile forge. "While Death Zone is occupied, I will prepare for the night."

Rain spread open his hands. "Really?"

Tallheart rumbled with amusement as he bent to lift his ingot cases. He turned, then walked away. "Come. We should begin."

Rain sighed, then lowered his visor and followed after him. "Fine, but if you call me Death Zone again, I'm going to start calling you The Rumbler. We'll see how you like it."

Ameliah covered her mouth with a hand to hide her smile. She left her own pack where it was and followed, calling her Lunar Orb back down from the ceiling. It didn't take them long to reach the jungle, and Rain paused in the mouth of the tunnel, his shadow cast behind him by the light of the fire moss.

"Well?" Ameliah asked. "What now, Captain?"

Rain gave her a look, drawing his mattock from his hip and gesturing with it toward the trees. "One monster that way. I don't know what kind. I can tell you it's not a Mottled Magma Frog."

"I will remain here," Tallheart said, setting down his cases and moving to free himself from his mobile forge. "Rain. Please use Detection to check for ore. I will dig into the passage wall to create our camp, and it would be beneficial if I could gather materials at the same time."

"You're going to *what?*" Rain asked, whirling around incredulously. "Tallheart, are you trying to get yourself buried alive? And, why would you do it in the tunnel? That's our way out!"

Tallheart shook his head patiently. "A cave-in is unlikely. We have reached deepstone."

Ameliah nodded. She'd noticed the gradual transition as they'd descended the cliff earlier, but she hadn't been sure enough in her determination to comment on it. "Relax, Rain. Tallheart knows what he's doing."

"I mean, yeah, but..." Rain gesticulated wildly. "Rocks fall, everyone dies!"

"Do not be dramatic," Tallheart said as he removed his mobile forge.

"Fine," Rain said, shaking his head. He paused for a few moments, then shrugged. "There isn't much, and it's just iron as far as I can tell. The side on your left has a little more, maybe, and not enough to make much of a difference. There's a richer pocket about seventy meters straight down, but there's no way that's worth the effort."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "Very well." He walked a few meters back up the tunnel, then drew his hammer and slammed it into the wall with a deafening crash. Deepstone or not, the rocks exploded into powder all the same, chunks of rubble tumbling to the tunnel floor. Rain pressed his hands to the sides of his helmet, though Ameliah wasn't sure what he was trying to achieve by doing so.

"Come on," she said, looping her arm through his elbow and towing him out into the cavern. Her own ears weren't exactly pleased either.

Together, she and Rain fled the noise to the center of the clearing, the echoing booms continuing as Tallheart brutalized the tunnel wall. Despite having told Rain to relax, Ameliah couldn't help feeling a small measure of anxiety as she glanced over her shoulder. *Tallheart's not exactly being careful from the sound of things. If he does trigger a collapse, I'd need to switch back to Geomancer to dig him out.*

She sighed. *I need more skill slots. My defensive passives take up too much room.*

"Okay, I'm going to try Refrigerate, if you're ready," Rain said over the continuing noise. "This is a Heat biome, more or less, and I want to see if a Cold spell will get some kind of a reaction."

"Okay," Ameliah said, returning her attention to the task at hand. She felt a chill spread over her as fog formed in the air, but there was no reaction from the environment apart from that. With Mana Sight, she could see Rain's magic stop abruptly after a few meters.

"Hmm," Rain said, dropping the spell. He waited a moment, then knelt to inspect a small leafy shrub that had been one of the few bits of vegetation within range. "Damn," he said, standing again with a sigh. "Well, the plants don't like it, but at least there was no magical response. Time to deal with that monster I sensed."

"Where is it now?" Ameliah asked, waving her hand through the lingering fog as it mixed with the returning humid air.

"It's right behind there," Rain said, pointing to a bush standing all on its own several meters out into the clearing.

"Really?" Ameliah said, raising an eyebrow.

"Really," Rain said. "I guess it thinks it's being clever. Nothing a little Monty Python won't fix." He raised his voice, speaking toward the bush with a strange accent. "Mr. Nesbitt, will you stand up, please?"

Unsurprisingly, nothing happened, and Ameliah gave Rain a blank look.

He raised a hand, continuing with his silly accent. "Mr. Nesbitt has learned the first lesson of not being seen: not to stand up. However, he has chosen a very obvious piece of cover."

Ameliah heaved a long-suffering sigh, then blinked as heat washed over her. The spell was clearly Immolate from the mana pattern, not an unexpected attack or anything. She just hadn't expected Rain to use a Heat spell.

There was a startled squawk from behind the bush, then a screech of outrage. A Scarlet Fatbird hopped into view, its feathers all alight. It screeched, then charged in their direction.

"What the—!" Rain shouted, raising his shield. Ameliah smiled, stepping back out of the way.

At level eight, the Fatbird wasn't a threat, though the 'Scarlet' variant wasn't one she was familiar with. Fatbirds were everything that the name implied. They were flightless, with short, stubby beaks and rotund bodies that allowed them to roll toward their foes with surprising speed. They were something of a joke around the Guild, really. It clearly had some resistance

to fire, at least, judging from how it hadn't died yet. Rain had put quite a bit of power behind his spell.

As the flaming bird tumbled angrily in their direction, Rain switched out Immolate for Refrigerate. The expanding shell of cold intercepted the monster well before it reached them, and it squawked in sudden pain, skidding to a stop. Its health was dropping sharply, and it wasn't able to recover its footing before the spell killed it outright.

"Why did you start with fire?" Ameliah asked casually, raising an eyebrow at Rain as he canceled his spell.

"Because in what I was referencing, the bush explodes," Rain said, stepping forward to inspect the downed monster. "Besides, I wanted to see how Immolate would react with the ambient mana. It was definitely a bit hotter than I was expecting at that power level. Anyway, what the hell is this thing? Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Yes," Ameliah said, joining him. "Fatbirds are weak for their level—at least, the regular ones are. I'm a little surprised to see one down here. I've never found a bird monster in a cave before." She gestured vaguely at the trees. "Though, I suppose I shouldn't be that shocked."

Rain nodded. "But a Fatbird? Really? Who's naming these things?"

Ameliah shrugged. "The first person to encounter a monster gets to name it, just like with lairs. You don't see undiscovered monsters often, but it happens from time to time. I guess whoever named these however many thousands of years ago was feeling literal."

"I guess..." Rain said, shaking his head. He set down his mattock and reached out to lift the bird-monster's stubby wing. "Hey, you don't happen to know if these are edible, do you?"

Ameliah blinked. *That's what he asks? And here I was thinking he was going to latch onto the naming thing. He's usually super interested in how the system works. Maybe he already knew from Staavo?*

"Ameliah?"

"Sorry, yes, they are. They aren't good, by any means, but they're edible. Don't tell me you're already hungry again. We just ate a few hours ago."

"Accolades, what can I say?" Rain said with a shrug, standing. He started dragging the slightly-charred and semi-frozen bird after him, headed back toward the tunnel. "We can try cooking it later."

Ameliah snorted, watching him. *He's going to get fatter than that bird at this rate.* She turned her attention back to the jungle, hearing a branch snap far in the distance. Rain returned before anything revealed itself, stopping to stand next to her.

He nodded to her. "Okay, next test. Let's see how the trees do with Refrigerate. Better than the plants, hopefully." He walked forward, right up to the edge of the clearing, then stopped to press a hand against one of the tree trunks.

Ameliah joined him, finding the rough bark warm to the touch. She braced herself for the icy chill, but it didn't come, so she turned her head to look at him. "What are you waiting for?"

"Nothing," Rain said, shaking his head. "It's just...there are animals in range. They're staying back, but not far enough."

"So exclude them," Ameliah said with a shrug, sure that them attacking wasn't what he was worried about. "They'll feel the cold and run."

Rain shook his head. "Some might not make it. There are also the insects, which are too small to move that fast. I don't want to kill them—even the plants, really. Not if I can help it. I'm going to need to use my spells in there, though."

Ameliah smiled, shaking her head. "Only you would feel bad for insects." She gestured. "Look at this place. It's enormous. I don't think you could do any lasting damage to the jungle even if you tried. And I wouldn't worry about hurting the animals. They live with the monsters. You should be worried about *them* hurting *you*."

"I know," Rain said resignedly. "Here we go. Just be ready in case a flying blue guy with a mullet shows up to kick my ass." He raised a hand before she could ask him what in the depths he was talking about. "I'm not serious. Captain Planet is another superhero. A really cheesy one. Sorry, I make references when I'm uncomfortable."

"No," Ameliah said, smiling softly. "You make references all the time."

Rain shook his head slowly. "Like I said. Sorry, I'll stop. I know it's annoying."

"No, it's not annoying," Ameliah said, removing her hand from the tree and placing it on his shoulder. It was only partly a lie. *He must feel homesick. I know he doesn't want to return to his world, but it must still be hard for him to be alone in such a different culture. He's just longing for something familiar.*

She shivered as Rain activated his spell, the cold quite welcome as a relief from the heat of the jungle.

I should pick a story to share with him like he's sharing with us. Maybe The Voyage of the Lost? I'm no bard, but I've heard it told enough times that I could probably... She stopped herself with a tiny shake of her head. No, that's a terrible idea. I only really know the songs by heart, so the rest of it would be a mess. There must be a written version out there. I should ask around Vestvall before I try to go from memory. I'm not a Dynamo.

"Huh," Rain said, snapping her out of her contemplation. She felt the cold deepen, the fog turning to snow and floating down to coat the jungle floor. She returned her hand to the tree, her fingers finding the bark still warm.

Rain turned to look at her. "Brace yourself. I'm going nova."

Ameliah smiled, deciding to be literal and activating Brace, not that she needed the boost to her defenses. It wasn't like Rain's magic would attack her directly. Seconds later, Rain exploded with sapphire light, and she had to look away, blinking from the sudden increase in brightness.

I wish I could turn Mana Sight off completely. It's not without its downsides.

Before her eyes could adapt, the magical light vanished, the world returning to the reddish hue from the fire moss. Leaves crinkled as she shifted her position. She could feel the underbrush breaking apart beneath her feet, brittle after having been frozen solid. The tree seemed to have fared better, though it was covered in a layer of frost.

Ameliah switched Mana Sight into active mode with a thought, finding that mana was still circulating within the tree trunk in the slow, placid manner characteristic to plants. It had a decent amount of it, actually. For a tree.

"Hey, Detection says the trees survived," Rain said, sounding relieved.

Ameliah nodded, glancing at him. Mana Sight was still active, so she could see exactly how much mana he had spent. Fully three-quarters of his pool was now gone. "That was a bit much for a test, don't you think?"

Rain shrugged. "It comes back."

"Things Dynamos say," Ameliah said, shaking her head.

She walked into the jungle, her passage made significantly easier by the damage Rain had done to the underbrush, the tangled vines and bushes falling apart at the slightest touch. She spoke without looking back. "Are you going to use Aura Focus, or just let your mana come back on its own?"

"On its own," Rain replied, the crunch of his footsteps joining hers. "You're here, so I'm not worried. We don't have the time for me to keep doing that."

"Okay," Ameliah said with a shrug. It was dark under the shade of the canopy, so she conjured a Firebolt above her fingertips, holding it there. Her Lunar Orb was busy. She'd left it with standing instructions to twirl about Tallheart's antlers.

"Tsk," Rain said, kneeling. "Look. It's some kind of squirrel thing. Frozen solid." He sighed. "Could use it for soup, I guess."

Ameliah turned to see him prying the furry creature off the frozen ground. She raised a questioning eyebrow. "Are you hungry, or are you sad? I can't tell with the visor down."

"Both," Rain said with a sigh. He shook his head. "I'd rather not eat squirrel, given a choice, but now that it's dead, there's no sense letting it go to waste."

"Right," Ameliah said, nodding. "Hey, have you thought of using your oversoul? I know you usually try to suppress it, but if you boost it instead, you might be able to make them all run away..." She trailed off, seeing that Rain was shaking his head.

"It doesn't work on animals," he said.

"Wait, really? I thought they just got used to it like people do. If you actually push, it might be different."

Rain shook his head. "I thought so too, but no. I've tried it. Dust was annoying me a few weeks ago, following me around everywhere for some reason. He didn't even seem to notice when I tried to scare him off with oversoul."

"Sure, but that hardly proves anything," Ameliah said. "That horse is weird. Your fault, by the way."

Rain smiled. "You do have a point there, but that's not all. I ran more experiments while you were busy in Vestvall." He shook his head. "Animal souls must be different, somehow, assuming they have them. Your guess is as good as mine for why that would be. Humans are animals, too, when it comes down to it."

"Hmm," Ameliah said doubtfully, a flicker of motion catching her eye through the trees. She still had Mana Sight in active mode, and she'd seen a relatively powerful signature for a moment through the trees.

"I've got it," Rain said. "It's just a Deepcat."

Another pulse of cold washed over Ameliah, and seconds later, the system informed her of the monster's death. Rain started walking in that direction, passing beyond the edge of his first nova and into the mostly undamaged underbrush.

"I'm surprised there's this little resistance," he said, fighting with a heavy vine. "Other than that frog you exploded, there doesn't seem to be anything dangerous out here. Maybe that will change after nightfall."

Ameliah frowned, gently trying to free her sleeve from a thorny bush. "Or maybe there's something big in these trees, and the reason we're not finding many monsters is that it's hungrier than you are."

"Don't say that," Rain said, waging his own war on the underbrush with his mattock. "Are you trying to tempt fate?" He grunted in frustration. "Damn it, I'm going to need a machete or something unless I want to freeze a tunnel through the whole jungle. I regenerate mana fast, but not that fast." He heaved a defeated sigh, returning the tool to its loop on his belt.

"Deepcats taste awful, anyway. Let's see if Purify helps."

"Mmm," Ameliah said, finally fighting free of the thorns as the white light of his spell washed over her. The dead foliage behind them dissolved into ash, then faded away, but the largely undamaged plants near the Deepcat remained. The monster itself vanished, leaving behind a lone Tel that shone brilliantly in her magical vision. She summoned it with Attract, then tucked it into a pouch.

"Oh, hey," Rain said, pointing at her. "There's fruit on that bush next to you."

Ameliah turned to look, seeing a cluster of green oblong fruits hanging low to the ground, beneath all the thorns. Each one was about the size of her hand.

"What do you think?" Rain asked, fighting his way over to her. "Could they be edible? It would be great if we could find something for Tallheart."

"No mana concentration to speak of," Ameliah said, bending and rolling up her sleeve, not wanting to risk any more damage to her poor shirt. She reached through the thorns and gingerly pulled one of the fruits free, then raised it to her nose and sniffed. *Smells okay.*

"Wait!" Rain shouted, but Ameliah had already taken a bite, her teeth easily tearing through the tough rind. She spat her mouthful away immediately, sticking out her tongue before Purifying away the flavor.

"Sour," she said, holding the fruit out to Rain. "Not poisonous. Here."

Rain accepted it gingerly, then slid his visor up so he could raise it to his nose. "Smells like *kiwifruit.*" He turned to look at her. "Sorry, I don't know the word. They're like...hairy eggs."

"They sound delicious," Ameliah said sarcastically. She smirked as Rain touched his tongue to the pulp of the fruit, then recoiled. "I told you it was sour," she said.

Rain smiled, then to her surprise, he took a huge bite, getting the fruit's juice all over his face. His reaction was marvelous, like a turtle trying to retract into its shell. "Gah, nope, nope, nope!" He spluttered as he spat the fruit on the ground, then cleansed himself with his own blast of Purify.

He looked up, then chuckled. "Let's bring some back for Tallheart. Maybe he'll like them. His taste buds are weird." He grinned wickedly. "And if not, we'll get to see his reaction."

Ameliah laughed. "Sure." She watched as Rain busied himself with picking the bush clean of the sour fruits. His armor had no trouble with the thorns, of course. While he was occupied, she raised her hand, elevating her flame and taking another look around. "How far do you think this jungle goes, anyway? Should I switch back to Flight and try to go over it?"

"Now there's an idea," Rain said, looking up at her. He rose with an armful of the fruits, a couple of them tumbling free. He chuckled to himself. "Why can't I hold all these dire limes?!"

"Dire limes?"

"Why not? Anyway, you'd need to mess with the prerequisites again to get Flight, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah," Ameliah said, checking the time. "It would have to wait for tomorrow."

Rain nodded, then jerked his chin up toward the treetops. "There are some pretty big branches up there. Do you think you could just use Redirection to hop from branch to branch instead? Like a ninja?"

"Maybe," Ameliah said, looking up. Rain had long-since explained what ninjas were. She tilted her head, considering. "Airwalk would be better for that. I could take it with less work than Flight, but it would still be tomorrow. I'll think about it. I'm awful with that skill, but it would be a good opportunity to practice."

Rain grinned. "Awesome. Anyway, let's go test these on Tallheart, then we should explore as much as we can before it gets dark."

"Sounds good," Ameliah said, looking down. She snorted softly. "Don't forget your squirrel."