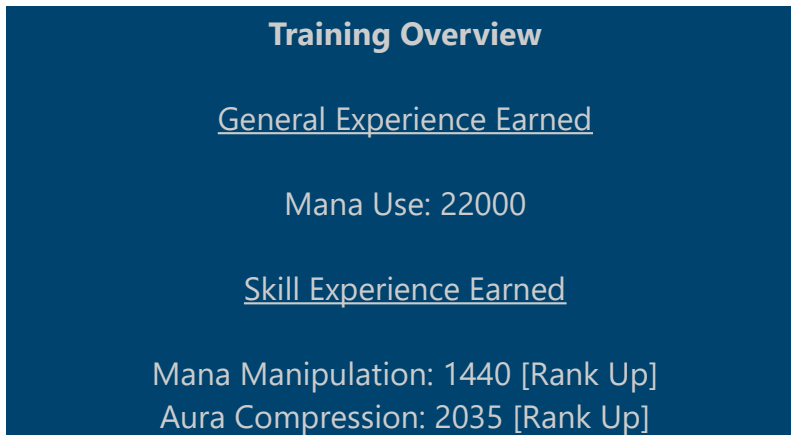


## 084: Entry

In the early dawn light, Rain's eyes flickered open, seeing only blackness. Aura Focus was still active, of course. He was once more sleeping in the Watch stronghold. He flicked on his HUD, noting the time as 5:48 AM, almost fifteen minutes before his alarm was set to go off.

*Close enough.*

He triggered the alarm, forcing his training overview to appear instantly.

A dark blue rectangular HUD screen with white text. The title "Training Overview" is at the top. Below it is the section header "General Experience Earned", followed by the value "Mana Use: 22000". The next section header is "Skill Experience Earned", followed by two lines of text: "Mana Manipulation: 1440 [Rank Up]" and "Aura Compression: 2035 [Rank Up]".

<b>Training Overview</b>
<u>General Experience Earned</u>
Mana Use: 22000
<u>Skill Experience Earned</u>
Mana Manipulation: 1440 [Rank Up]
Aura Compression: 2035 [Rank Up]

There was nothing unexpected there. Lots of item charging and a little bit of cooling translated to a rank-up in both Mana Manipulation and Aura Compression. Both skills were slow to level, but he was making steady progress. Likewise, he would be done with the tier-2 unlocks soon. It has been easier to unlock the full 22 trees this time, the feeling of discomfort only setting in for the last few. The only thing that had stopped him from trying to go further was the fear of injuring himself. He couldn't afford that, right before going into a lair. He needed to be ready.

He dropped Winter temporarily, throwing off his blanket to bare his armor to the rising sun before lying down and reactivating the skill. He had another two hours, and he wanted his

armor to be as charged as possible. Uncovering himself would allow the charge to build, rather than be consumed by the regeneration rune.

He checked his HUD next, seeing that his mana was empty. Mana Manipulation was still going, feeding power into the armor. His health and his stamina were both at full.

*Good.*

Yesterday afternoon, he'd configured his ring with the settings that he intended to use in the lair. He needed to be at his best, and that meant he needed his health and stamina caps as high as possible. Likewise, he needed to leave them there so he could regenerate. His base Regen hadn't been enough, but he'd found a solution in the form of a potion from the alchemistry shop. Alchemistry was a catch-all word that referred to both alchemy and chemistry; there really wasn't an English equivalent.

He pulled open his panels to confirm his settings, as well as check for any changes to his tolerances overnight.

## Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 18

Experience: 22749/22750

Dynamo

Health	900
Stamina	560
Mana	7492

Strength	45[10]
Recovery	36[10]
Endurance	28[10]
Vigor	25[10]
Focus	39[10]
Clarity	229[200]

Free Points	0
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## Statistics

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Base</b>	<b>Modifier</b>
Health	900	900	0 100%
H.Regen	360/day	360/day	0/day 100%
Stamina	560	560	0 100%
S.Regen	250/day	250/day	0/day 100%
Mana	7492	7492	0 100%
M.Regen	2.62/s	0.245/s	-0.15/s 1130.0%

Movement Speed	10
Perception	20

## Resistances

<b>Heat</b>	<b>Cold</b>	<b>Light</b>	<b>Dark</b>
3 0%	3 0%	3 0%	53 0%
<b>Force</b>	<b>Arcane</b>	<b>Mental</b>	<b>Chemical</b>
3 0%	3 0%	3 0%	3 0%

## Adaptation

	Effective	Total	Base	Sync	Buff	Tolerance
Strength	6	45	10	24%	35	15
Recovery	6.56	36	10	41%	26	6
Endurance	3.6	28	10	30%	18	2
Vigor	9.75	25	10	39%	15	15
Focus	39	39	10	100%	29	49
Clarity	229	229	200	100%	29	61

	Current	Tolerance
Enchantment Stat Boosts	152	132
Enchantment Resistances	50	Unknown

*Nice. Vigor synchronization went up. That confirms it.*

When he'd stopped to adjust the ring yesterday, he'd noticed that his synchronization—or potential as he'd previously referred to it—had gone up for the Strength stat. He hadn't been doing anything in particular, just walking around the city. The exercise had apparently been enough to improve his synchronization at last.

As for why it hadn't gone up before, he had a guess: he'd always been training while past his tolerance. All of the progress had been going toward raising his cap, not improving his synchronization. However, he hadn't been past his cap on Strength with the settings that he'd selected yesterday morning. He'd only had ten points added, while his tolerance was fifteen. That was the difference that had gotten him a point of synchronization. It had been an exciting revelation that had him wanting to spend the rest of the afternoon training, but he'd forced himself to stop and think.

He wasn't a warrior. He didn't need to be mighty. He needed Strength for health, nothing else. Synchronization didn't help with that, at least, as far as he could tell. After some thought, he'd set the ring as it was now. The one concession that he'd made to testing his new hypothesis

had been to peg his Vigor buff exactly at his tolerance. It looked like that test had paid off by that the fact that his Vigor synchronization had improved.

He smiled, closing the window and turning his attention to his skills. Aura Compression had leveled, which was a nice all-around boost, but not something that would make the difference in the lair. The same was true of Mana Manipulation. It didn't really have any combat applications as he had yet to find a way to use it to shape his spells. He pulled open the full menu to have a quick look through all of his capabilities. Even though he had no problem remembering them all, seeing them helped him order his thoughts.

## Skills

### Aura Metamagic

#### Tier 0

##### **Amplify Aura** (10/10)

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

##### **Extend Aura** (10/10)

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

#### Tier 1

##### **Aura Focus** (10/10)

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

##### **Aura Synergy** (10/10)

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

## Tier 2

### **Aura IFF** (10/10)

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

## Tier 3

### **Aura Compression** (6/10) Exp: 1765/12800

Compress aura output, reducing range to boost intensity  
Increase intensity by 1.2% per meter of compression

## Defensive Auras

## Tier 2

### **Force Ward** (10/10)

Increase physical resistance by 54% for all entities  
Range: 18 meters  
Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

## Magical Utility

## Tier 0

### **Intrinsic Clarity** (10/10)

Multiply base mana regeneration by 300%

### **Intrinsic Focus** (10/10)

Multiply base mana by 300%

## Tier 1

### **Channel Mastery** (10/10)

Allows intuitive control of channeled skill intensity  
Minimum skill intensity: 0%  
Maximum skill intensity: 200%  
Skill mana cost modified by intensity adjustment

### **Mana Manipulation** (7/10) Exp: 83/4400

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 1246.0 mp/s (fcs)

## Tier 2

### **Magical Synergy** (10/10)

Enables limited synergistic cross-coupling of magical attributes  
25.0% of Focus contributes to M.Regen  
25.0% of Clarity contributes to Mana

## Offensive Auras

### Tier 0

### **Immolate** (10/10)

151-172 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment  
Sufficient damage causes ignition  
Range: 18 meters  
Cost: 50 mp/s

### **Refrigerate** (10/10)

151-172 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment  
Sufficient damage causes slow  
Range: 18 meters  
Cost: 50 mp/s

## Utility Auras

### Tier 0

### **Purify** (10/10)

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

### **Winter** (10/10)

Boost M.Regen by 180% for all entities  
Range: 18 meters  
Cost: 10 mp/hr

## Tier 1



**Detection** (10/10)

Sense selected items of interest  
Not occluded by mundane materials  
Resolution: 2.07 mm  
Range: 18 meters  
Cost: 10 mp/s

**Essence Well** (10/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user  
Transfer Rate: 18 mp/s  
Efficiency: 20%  
Range: 18 meters

**Velocity** (10/10)

180.00% boost to speed for all entities  
Range: 18 meters  
Cost: 10 mp/s

Free Skill Points: 0

He had plenty of options, but he still felt ill-suited for the task that had been set before him. His current build was massively beneficial for mages, but there wouldn't be any mages in the party other than himself. There was still a lot he could do, but it all came down to how Velika wanted to run the expedition. He'd either be in the back using Purify while she killed everything, or frantically trying to keep the unawakened alive with Velocity and Force Ward while she watched with sadistic glee.

He was not looking forward to this at all. Melka had told him about the types of monsters that awaited them. There would be slimes galore, but also Plague Rats, Devil Fish, Fungiforms, Chem Kin, and a few other, rarer things. He had been quite distraught after Melka had finished describing all of the horrible kinds of death that waited for him. She'd tried to console him, saying that the Fells was reasonably tame as lairs went. She'd been in there four times, and while it had been stressful and disgusting, nobody in any of her parties had even come close to dying.

Somehow, that didn't make him feel any better.

Still, he had his armor, and he'd purchased one of the single-use resistance charms. That would help deal with the various poisons and acids that he was likely to encounter, but he'd have to wait to use it until it was needed. He also had the Quickstaff, which would be useful for keeping things at a distance if nothing else. He had no illusions about his ability to use it to kill anything stronger than a slime, but that wasn't why he'd bought it.

He'd left the Havenheild company outfitter—it was a chain, incidentally—with the staff and the charm, only spending a hundred Tel. The rest had been covered with mana. The limiting factor had been the number of items that had needed charging. If not for that, he would have happily sat there until he ended up owning the whole store.

Melka had suggested that he buy a shield as well, but he'd ultimately decided against it. They were cumbersome. If he wasn't wearing seamless full plate, it would have made sense to get one, but anything that a shield could block, his armor could block better. The enchantments on the ones that had been for sale simply weren't good enough to justify it in his mind. Keeping things away with the staff and dodging would serve him better than trying to block.

That wasn't the end of his purchases, not by a long shot. He also had an extensive collection of potions in tiny glass vials, and even a bandoleer to carry them. Healing and stamina potions, mostly. He'd wanted healing scrolls, but Mlem hadn't been around when he'd gone looking for him. Reason's potions were slower-acting and restored less health, but they were much cheaper. A standard healing scroll restored four hundred health instantly, while the potions restored around three hundred over a few minutes.

They also came in three flavors: health, stamina, and mana. The mana potions tasted like mint. He'd bought one, just out of curiosity. He'd have had to drink gallons of the stuff to restore any significant quantity of mana. For health and stamina, however, they were a godsend. He was kicking himself for not buying any before. To compensate, he got ten of each, as well as a pair of overnight recovery potions. Those were incredibly slow-acting but would restore around one thousand each of health, stamina, and mana, provided that he was asleep. Unfortunately, they tasted like stewed feet.

The original bill for the potions had come to 120 Tel, but he hadn't parted with a single crystal. It turned out that Myth and Reason had plenty of equipment that needed recharging, mostly for use in their work. Even so, their assistant, Jamus's friend Meloni, had been less than pleased with the arrangement. She'd called him a haggling demon. All he'd done was to remind her that Myth had told him the basic potions only cost two Tel to make.

He'd overpaid, and by quite a bit, charging their equipment with over ten thousand mana. Myth and Reason had eventually convinced Meloni that it was a good deal in the long run. However, that hadn't stopped Melka from teasing him with his new nickname all evening. He still hadn't decided if 'Haggling Demon' was worse than 'Night Cleaner'.

He smiled. Thinking about his shopping trip was helping distract him from his impending doom. It had been fun, hunting down the various items he'd needed. He found it a little odd, actually. He'd always hated going to the mall. His standard procedure had been to just go straight for the item he needed and then to get out as fast as possible. However, there was something about the whole bartering process that made it so much more enjoyable. That was also odd, as he hated car salesmen. Maybe it had to do with the fact that he kept winning for some reason. He chuckled. *It's got to be the armor.*

Only now did he admit to himself that he might have gotten a bit carried away. His bag and pouches were stuffed with so much random stuff that he felt like he was ready to open his own store. It was like the time in college when his friend James had decided to buy one of each mundane item listed in the player's handbook. That had been an enjoyable argument to watch. Carlos, who'd been running the campaign, had contrived to set the annoying bard's wagon on fire.

He sighed wistfully, wondering what his old friends were doing now. Not for the last time, he wished that he'd kept in contact with them. His smile was replaced with a grimace as other memories flashed through his mind, unbidden. As far as his friends were concerned, he might as well have died at the same time as his father. The following years were a mass of pain and regret as he spiraled deeper and deeper into depression, especially after losing his mother as well. He could remember those years with perfect clarity, as much as he wished to forget.

He gritted his teeth, forcing his thoughts back to the present. This was not the time to be thinking about the past. He'd bought all of the supplies to increase his chances of seeing the future. He'd never been a scout, but the motto 'be prepared' was a good one to live by. He didn't know he *wouldn't* need a hatchet or a grappling hook or set of lock picks, never mind that he had no idea how to use the last. Some day, those lock picks might end up as the difference between being able to disarm a trap and dying a horrible death. Yes, he might have gotten a bit carried away. Still, he'd much rather lug around a bit of extra weight than find himself missing some critical item when he needed it most. Besides, it was decent strength training.

He sighed. He was as prepared as he was going to get other than waiting for the armor to charge. Getting back to sleep was probably a hopeless proposition, but he knew that he should try. He couldn't relax, not with the lair filling his thoughts. To distract himself, he started acting out some of the children's stories in his mind, trying to imagine the characters

as living, breathing people. It was only marginally helpful for his nerves. In those stories, the hero always won.

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Beneath Fel Sadanis were the sewers. Below one corner of the sewers was a Watch stronghold, kept perpetually lit with evertorches. In that stronghold lay the entrance to the Fells. The portal was in a large room with a high ceiling, held up by arches made from neatly hewn blocks of dark stone. The portal itself was set into the wall, framed with another arch of smaller bricks.

Velika looked down on the occupants of the room from her perch. She'd wedged herself between one of the arches and the ceiling in an effort to stay concealed in the shadows. Because of the need to keep the room lit, there weren't many of those to be had. It was fortunate that people so rarely looked up.

She'd hidden on a whim after growing bored of waiting for the rest of the party to arrive. Only the two guards standing next to the portal knew that she was up here, but she didn't care about them. They were just here to make sure that nobody tried going through on their own. Both were nobles, levels 5 and 7, two of the highest that she'd recruited for the guard so far. She didn't trust them. She was having trouble trusting anyone these days. However, she'd needed *someone* to guard the door.

As for the party itself, six of the eight members had arrived, including herself. It was already ten minutes past the appointed time, but she reminded herself to be patient. Scaring the depths out of the recruits was something that she'd enjoyed doing since she was a small child. It would be worth the wait.

She smiled as a man wearing an elegant green tunic entered the room. *Just one more to go.*

"Hey, sorry I'm late," said the man, looking around. "Oh, I thought the Citizen would be here."

"She has yet to arrive," said a large man wearing an expensive-looking suit of red-enameled armor. *Well, not that expensive, compared to his.* Her eyes flicked to the black-cloaked form of the adventurer, currently sitting against the wall.

"Your name is, Samson, right? Lord Darr's son?" said a woman wearing a quiver on her back and holding a bow. "You remember me, right? From the selection?"

The man in the green tunic opened his mouth to respond but froze with a gasp. He pointed at the adventurer sitting against the wall. "Holy shit, it's the Night Cleaner! What's he doing here?"

"Readin'," said a kid wearing a leather jacket and holding a wooden staff almost taller than he was. "What are ye, fuckin' blind?" His face bore a mocking grin. Velika smiled. She liked the kid, though she would never tell him that, of course. He reminded her of herself, though considerably less noble. His accent was almost unintelligible. He was probably from a dinky farming village called something stupid like 'Gubber's Well' or 'Goat Thorp'.

"Silence, peasant!" roared a tall man wearing a fancy blue outfit embroidered with golden thread. She actually remembered this one's name. Arlo. He was Lord Rill's son, and he was a moron. Unfortunately, intelligence hadn't been a part of the selection criteria. Thirty-four people had passed the physical test that she'd set, and then there'd been the drawing to bring it down to six. Skill and luck were all anyone needed. She'd been sick of all the unawakened hick nobles jockeying for position, and the lottery had been the easiest way to shut them up.

"Fuck ye too, ye gussied-up man-whore," said the kid. She had to stifle a laugh. Arlo *was* wearing makeup. Just a bit, and it was hardly out of fashion with the nobility, but it wasn't helping his reputation in her eyes. Nobody cared what you looked like in the middle of a battle. He had his priorities all wrong.

"Insolence!" Arlo roared, taking an aggressive step toward the kid.

"Enough, both of you," the adventurer said, his voice echoing coldly from within his helmet. She looked over at him as he turned a page in his book. "Arlo, tone down the superiority act. Kettel, what have I told you about trying to get yourself killed? You should treat others with respect."

"Aww, come on, Rain!" the kid said. "He started it!"

The adventurer sighed.

"I demand satisfaction!" shouted Arlo, looking a bit red in the face.

"No," said the seated adventurer. The sense of cold that had been filling the room pulsed sharply, going from merely icy to downright frigid. "Remember why we are here. The Citizen would not be pleased if you two killed each other before we even got inside."

Everyone except the kid had taken a step back at the sudden burst of cold that emanated from the adventurer. Velika chuckled softly. The spell that the man was using was harmless, quite beneficial, in fact. These idiots couldn't tell the difference, naturally. It was the same one that he'd been using at the Watch stronghold for the past few nights. Her smile faded as she once more considered the implications of the Watch's mages being able to recover their mana. *I beat them once, and I can do it again...*

She turned her head as the last of the lottery winners arrived, a woman wearing chainmail and wielding a mace and a shield. All of the equipment was flecked with rust. Velika smiled again. *Thank the heavens that it wasn't all noble brats. I'd have lost my mind. I hate spoiled children. It's a damn shame that only she and the kid made it.*

"Oh, am I the last?" The new woman spoke. "Are we meeting the Citizen inside, or..."

Velika dropped from the ceiling, pushing off and redirecting herself in mid-air with Airwalk. She landed lightly behind the woman, a grin on her face. Collective gasps of alarm filled the room as people reacted to her sudden arrival. The woman she'd landed behind whirled, grabbing her mace in one smooth motion and whipping it at Velika's face. She stepped back, dodging effortlessly, then pushed the overbalanced woman, sending her toppling to the ground. The reactions were marvelous to behold; even the two guards at the barrier looked startled, despite knowing that she'd been there. There was one exception, however. The seated adventurer didn't seem fazed at all. He looked up calmly after a moment, closing his book.

Velika chuckled. "Not bad," she said. "I'd give it a six out of ten. Good instincts." She nodded to the woman, then looked around the room again. "Still, nobody wet themselves. I think I'm losing my touch."

"My Lady Citizen!" Arlo said, dropping to one knee. "It is an honor to be startled by you. Your beauty is as shocking as your—"

"Shut the fuck up," she thundered, cutting him off. She turned her glare back on the woman sprawled on the ground in front of her. "Why were you so late?"



The woman scrambled to her feet, bowing awkwardly. "Apologies, Citizen. I was delayed by the guards at the door." The woman struggled to catch her breath. "They insisted that I prove I had won the lottery, then refused to accept my token when I showed it to them."

Velika frowned. "Their names?"

"Sarmin Stonbrook and Larlo Wormorchard, Lady Citizen."

"And yours?"

"Breggeh, Lady Citizen."

"And how did you get past them, Breggeh?" Velika asked mildly.

"Begging the Citizen's pardon. I know that they are in your employ as well, but I sort of... knocked them out."

Velika laughed. "Good. They deserved it. I won't have anyone looking down on someone who's earned their place." Her eyes flicked to Kettel, then she turned and glared at Arlo, hoping that the message would make it through his thick skull. *If not, I will educate him. I'd kick his ass out right now, but I need his father, unfortunately.*

She stifled a sigh and turned her attention to the adventurer, who had gotten to his feet while she'd been talking. He inclined his head to her but said nothing. *Does he never take the armor off? Who reads while wearing a helmet?* She smiled. "You didn't react when I made my entrance," she said. "You knew I was there?"

He nodded.

"And yet you said nothing. Why?"

He hesitated for a second, then shrugged. "I didn't think you'd want me to spoil your fun."

Velika smiled and clapped her hand on the adventurer's armored shoulder. "Good thinking. I'd have had to hurt you if you ruined it."

---

*Oh Shit! Oh Fuck! Oh shit! Oh Fuck!*

It was all Rain could do not to flinch away from Velika's hand. Her pat on the shoulder had felt like getting swatted by a bear. He'd only managed to remain standing thanks to the fact that he'd already been holding himself rigid. Her movement had been unnaturally fast, and by the time he realized it was happening, her hand was already there, uncomfortably close to his neck.

"Well," Velika said, releasing him and turning to look at the rest of the group. "Now that we're all acquainted, let's get on with it, shall we?"

Rain resisted the urge to slump down in relief. He'd been doing his best to project an air of confidence, even going as far as pretending to read. It was the plan he'd come up with to ensure that the others—Arlo, in particular—listened to him. He needed them to see him as a competent and experienced adventurer so they would follow his commands. If they saw how terrified he was feeling, they'd never respect him, and that could get them killed.

"I am ready, Citizen Sadanis!" Arlo said. "It will be my great honor to be first through the barrier."

Rain shook his head, trying to relax. *Oh my god, he's such a tool.*

Velika laughed. "No way. He's first. In fact, he's in charge."

Rain paled. She was pointing directly at him.

"Uh..." he began, then quickly remembered that he was pretending to be unflappable. He cleared his throat and started again. "Citizen Sadanis, I assumed that you would lead us."

Velika shook her head. "No. I am coming with you to make sure none of you idiots die, that's it. The members of my guard need to learn how to do things for themselves; otherwise, there's no point. You're in command. Teach them, but don't coddle them. I don't want you just killing everything yourself. Oh, and if you kill a blue without making sure that they get the credit, I'll feed you your armor. Don't fuck up."

*Fuck!* He nodded slowly. "As you command, Citizen Sadanis."

Arlo stepped forward. "Citizen Sadanis, as the future leader of your guard, wouldn't you prefer that I—"

Velika slapped him with the back of her hand, hard. Actually, it was more like the entire backside of her forearm. He crumpled as if his legs had been cut from under him. "I told you to shut the fuck up," she said, rolling him over with her boot.

*Shit, is he dead?*

Arlo's eyelids flickered, then he groaned. Rain let out the breath he'd been holding. *Fucking idiot. How am I supposed to keep you alive if you keep pissing her off?*

"Haha! Take that, noble shithead!" said Kettel.

Rain closed his eyes. *Oh my god, Kettel. It isn't just Arlo. They're all dead.*

"Someone get him up," said Velika. "If he can't stand after that, he's got no place in my guard."

Kettel offered Arlo a hand, still grinning, but Arlo slapped it away, hauling himself to his feet on his own. He looked unsteady, a trickle of blood running from his mouth.

Rain frowned. *Well, it looks like he's okay. She must have held back. Still...* He shook his head, looking away from the Citizen. She had started to tap her foot. *Well, I guess I'm head moron then. I'd better get started before she gets annoyed with me too.*

A few people were watching him, waiting. *Confidence is key.* He cleared his throat, getting the attention of the rest. "Attention, please. If I am going to be in charge of this disaster, I'd like to make some things clear. If I tell you to do something, you do it. Asking why is fine, but do the thing first. Once we're in there, we're in real danger. Lairs are not to be underestimated, ever." He gestured to himself, then Velika. "Do not rely on us to save you. I have some experience, but this will be dangerous, even for me."

He paused, gauging their reactions. They were paying attention, other than Arlo, who was busy struggling with the stopper of a healing potion. That was good. It looked like his act was working. *If only I could get my hands to stop trembling.*

He took a deep breath, trying to decide what was the most important. He thought back, then smiled. "It is safe to assume that none of you other than the Citizen have been in a lair before; there are some things you should know. This," he indicated the sickly green wall of magic, "is the barrier. Once we go past here, we'll be in the lair. The first thing you'll notice is the party display. You'll be able to see the health, stamina, and mana of your party members."

It looked like the man in the red armor wanted to ask a question. Rain's smile widened into a grin. *Déjà vu*. He raised a hand to forestall him. "Not the actual number, just how much they have relative to their cap. You'll still be able to see it, even if you get split up. If someone's name disappears, it means they left the lair. If someone's health drops to zero, it does not mean they are dead. Do not make that mistake. It may still be possible to save them. If they are down, but still alive, don't try to move them. Use a scroll or a potion."

"I won't get hurt," said Arlo, tucking the empty potion bottle away. "This will be easy."

Rain's grin widened. *And the part of Val will be played by...* He cleared his throat. "As I already said, do not underestimate a lair." He walked over to the barrier, motioning the guard to stand aside, then placing his hand against it. He focused as he did so, holding the Common numerals in his mind. As he'd expected, the eleven that appeared on the barrier was written using the correct symbols for the others to understand. He turned to face them again, keeping his hand on the magical boundary.

"This is the lair's rank. Use it as a guide. Never enter a lair with a higher rank than the average level of your party, and never enter a lair alone." He paused, doing some quick math. *Velika is fifty or more, so... We're probably a bit under. Shit.* He shook his head, then continued reciting. "Don't assume that the lair's rank is that of the highest monster you can find inside. It is not. Watch your positioning and be careful about friendly fire. Use the—"

"Aren't you being a bit dramatic?" Arlo interrupted. Rather than feeling offended, Rain grinned. *Holy shit! This is uncanny. It's like he knows the script. A little early with the interruption there, but still.*

"I am not being dramatic," he said. As amusing as his little game had been, it was time to get serious. "I don't care how hard you've trained or how good your equipment is. There's things in there that will kill you without even giving you a chance to fight back. If you do not use caution, you will die. You can't know what will be on the other side, not for sure. Every time you enter a lair, you are taking your life into your own hands."

"Okay, that's enough," Velika said. "You *are* being dramatic. Get in there, windbag. Make sure it's safe, then deal with the stench and signal us to follow."

Rain winced. *Damn it.* He stood, debating whether it was worth arguing the point. At last, he nodded. "Very well."

He turned to face the barrier. Oddly, all of this pretending not to be afraid was actually helping. He hadn't been sure that he'd be able to walk through the portal at all, but as he strode toward it, his mind took on a crystal clarity. He focused, activating Force Ward to give himself total resistance to physical damage. *I am afraid, but I am the master of my fear.*

He stepped through, tensing as the green light slithered over him.

**The Fells**

Rank 11

98%

The light faded, revealing that he was inside a stone building, lit with an eerie green glow. This was 'the Temple'—the Watch had names for all of the lair's various areas. He'd been expecting the stench of the swamp, but the first thing to strike him was the heat. It was like a sauna, the air uncomfortably hot and wet as it crawled in through the seams of his armor. Had he not already been sweating from nerves, he would have started immediately. Fel Sadanis was still hot, even with both him and Mahria working on the problem, but the Fells was on a completely different level.

*Aaaand there's the smell. Not as bad as I expected, honestly.*

He pushed the thought aside, continuing to scan the room for danger. He didn't see anything, so he switched to Detection. His first pulse returned nothing, so he repeated it, this time as a nova. Still nothing. He felt himself start to relax, then cursed. *I can't trust it. I don't know if anything in here is capable of blocking Detection. It's not likely, but still.*

He looked up to make sure nothing was lurking on the ceiling, then scanned for traps with Detection, again finding nothing. *Again, that doesn't mean shit.* He stepped forward, ready to jump back in an instant should he trigger something that Detection had failed to find. Nothing happened, so he slowly worked his way into the center of the room.

The portal was set into the wall behind him, and he could see an arch at the other end of the room exiting to the swamp. A greenish light was filtering in, as if from the sun, even though they were deep underground. *Damn magical bullshit.*

He took one last look around, then stopped his pulses of Detection, activating Purify instead. The faint white light slowly spread out to fill the room.

*Huh. Now that's odd.*

The smell wasn't fading. Typically, even 1% of Purify was more than enough to deal with any sort of gaseous contaminant. He cranked up the power to 2%, then frowned. It wasn't working.

*"Damn it," he muttered under his breath, bringing it up to 5%. As he did so, he felt a sensation of resistance in his mind. It wasn't unlike how he felt when he was trying to convince the system to add a new panel, though not quite the same. It's like... It's like the lair is fighting me, somehow. Damn it, that makes sense. The Darkness lair killed light after all. Val's spell wasn't affected, though, probably because it is light-aspect. It could fight back. He grinned. Well, then. I'm fighting back too. Purify is the best spell ever, and it is purpose-built for this kind of thing. Nova!*

The white light blasted out from him in a shell. He smiled as his senses returned, the stench having been erased as if it had never been. The entire room was immaculate, the lichen that had been speckling the stone scoured free and banished to the void. He followed it up with a pulse of Refrigerate, bringing the temperature down to something a little bit more reasonable. Unfortunately, the resulting wind just brought more heat and stench with it from the door leading outside. He sighed. "Damn."

He activated Purify again, playing with the intensity until he found an equilibrium. At around 15% power, the spell started winning out over the lair's chemical aspect. He pulled open his interface to verify the mana usage. If he was going to maintain this indefinitely, he needed to make sure that it wouldn't drain him dry. Citizen Sadanis would just have to deal with the



smell if that was the case. It honestly wasn't that bad. He wasn't about to go walking through a lair without mana just because it smelled a bit earthy.

**Purify** (10/10)

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 15 mp/min

## Statistics

	Total	Base	Modifier
Health	900	900	0 100%
H.Regen	360/day	360/day	0/day 100%
Stamina	560	560	0 100%
S.Regen	250/day	250/day	0/day 100%
Mana	7492	7492	0 100%
M.Regen	-0.005/s	0.245/s	-0.25/s 100.0%

Movement Speed	10
Perception	20

## Resistances

Heat	Cold	Light	Dark
3 0%	3 0%	3 0%	53 0%
Force	Arcane	Mental	Chemical
3 0%	3 0%	3 0%	3 0%

*Damn. Just a bit too much. I'm not going to be able to keep this going. I'll have to try to convince Velika to... Hey, wait a damn minute here! The mana siphon is gone! The lair must be blocking it. Cool. The Majistraal have some limits, after all.*

"I got tired of waiting, but it looks like you're done anyway. Nice work," a voice said behind him. He jumped, whirling to see the Velika staring at him. She laughed. "Weren't you just telling all of us not to get distracted in a lair?"

He sighed, then shook his head. *Damn it, she's right.* He closed out his menus, returning to watching the door. "I am not going to be able to maintain this indefinitely." He said, without looking back. "The siphon cannot cross the boundary to the lair, but even so, my magic isn't strong enough to hold back the lair's influence without spending more mana than I regenerate."

"Pathetic," Velika said with a sigh. "Fine. You can stop. A little stench won't hurt us, and I've been through much worse. Save it for cleaning off the monster guts. That's the real reason you're here anyway. Chemical lairs are the worst."

Rain nodded, deactivating the spell. He could hear the others following them through the portal as the smell of the swamp slowly filtered back in from the open door. He kept watching the door, seeing the names of his companions appear one by one as they entered the lair. After the seventh name appeared, there was a long pause.

"Hurry the hells up!" Velika said.

"I can't!" came an answering shout from Breggeh. "I'm trying, but..."

Velika whirled, marching past Rain toward the entrance. He turned his head to follow her, continuing to check for monsters with Detection.

"What do you mean, 'you can't'?" Velika shouted. "Get in here right now, coward."

"No," Breggeh said, her voice sounding muffled as it came through the barrier. "It's not that. I physically can't. It feels like...jelly. The harder I push, the harder it pushes back."

*"FUCK!"* Velika swore explosively, slamming her fist into the wall beside the barrier. The entire room shook from the force of the blow as it cracked the stone. Dust would have fallen from the ceiling, had there been any left. She turned to stare at the door leading out into the swamp. "Someone else is in here."