

240: Sniffed

When all was said and done, the Kin hunt had been a bigger ordeal than both Rain and Ameliah had anticipated. Not because of the Guilders—the other parties having scampered away without confrontation—but because of the cleanup. The Kin had spread out over a considerable area, and even with Detection to find them and Ethereal Aura to kill them from two tunnels over, collecting the Tel meant navigating the entirety of the Shatterwarren.

The zone was fairly tame, all things considered, but the 'warren' part of the name was accurate. The core of it was a pair of large intersecting fissures, intersecting in an X and making something of a crossroads. Smaller fissures and cracks split off from there, branching into a web of dead ends and cramped spaces. The adventurer's `[[LOOT-NEED]]` was strong in both of them, but given the reward waiting with Mora and the more lucrative hunting in the depths below, it was debatable whether crawling through all that was worth it. They likely wouldn't have bothered had they not been engaged in a gratuitous leveling frenzy.

Progress Report

marker_1: threecore [3061 First Harvest 01 09:15]
marker_2: horde_handled [3061 First Harvest 01 18:02]

Span: 8.8 hours

Character

Total Exp: 6,136,316 -> 7,936,316 (+1,800,000)

↳Monster Kills: 791,375

↳Stamina Use: 291,925

↳Mana Use: 734,415

Skills

Mana Sight: +103,200 exp, 0 -> 10 (+10)

Mana Vent: +103,200 exp, 0 -> 10 (+10)

Endless Quiver: +51,600 exp, 0 -> 10 (+10)

Energy Well: +25,800 exp, 0 -> 10 (+10)

Seeker Shot: +7,515 exp, 0 -> 8 (+8)

Airwalk: +17,715 exp, 0 -> 7 (+7)

Attract: +6,270 exp, 0 -> 6 (+6)

Healing Word: +1,725 exp, 0 -> 5 (+5)

Sniper Shot: +1,500 exp, 0 -> 3 (+3)

Empire of Brawn: +2,000 exp, 0 -> 2 (+2)

Empire of Drive: +2,000 exp, 0 -> 2 (+2)

Empire of Grit: +2,000 exp, 0 -> 2 (+2)

Empire of Will: +2,000 exp, 0 -> 2 (+2)

Prismatic Intent: +18,202 exp, 10 -> 11 (+1)

Ranged Arsenal: +340 exp, 0 -> 1 (+1)

Bleeder Shot: +100 exp, 0 -> 1 (+1)

Multishot: +70 exp, 0 -> 1 (+1)

Piercing Shot: +25 exp, 0 -> 1 (+1)

Drilling Shot: +20 exp, 0 -> 1 (+1)

Heavy Armor Inventory: 0 -> 1 (+1)

Strong Draw: 0 -> 1 (+1)

Skills

filter: granted

Heavy Armor

Tier 3

Mana Vent (10/10) - Granted

Desaturate heavy armor by venting accumulated mana

Rate: 2900.0 mp/s

Cost: 1000 sp

Heavy Armor Inventory (1/10) Exp: 0/800 - Granted

Gain a soul inventory for up to 15 pieces of heavy armor

Equipped heavy armor may be dismissed to the inventory at will

Stored heavy armor may be recalled to the appropriate open slot at will

Cost: 200 mp/kg

Hurling

Tier 3

Ranged Arsenal (1/10) Exp: 340/800 - Granted

Gain a soul inventory for up to 15 ranged weapons

Equipped ranged weapons may be dismissed to the inventory at will

Stored ranged weapons may be recalled to the appropriate open slot at will

Stored ammunition-tagged weapons may be recalled directly into an appropriate launcher-tagged weapon

Cost: 200 mp/kg

Magical Utility

Tier 3

Mana Sight (10/10) - Granted

Passively perceive mana within the environment

Resolution is 100% of that of mundane optical sight

Activate to perceive mana within entities

Active Cost: 10 mp/s

Compatible with other sensory skills at 100% resolution while activated

Physicality

Tier 2

Airwalk (7/10) Exp: 1,315/8,800 - Granted

Step on air as if it were stone

Cost: variable sp, depending upon rank and applied force

Restoration

Tier 0

Healing Word (5/10) Exp: 325/1,100 - Granted

Invoke a word of healing to restore health to touched entity

Healing: 264-396 hp

Cost: 10 mp

Sharpshooting

Tier 0

Seeker Shot (8/10) Exp: 1,215/2,900 - Granted

Shoot an arrow that tracks its target

Turn speed: 1729.00 deg/s

Tracking effect expires after 80 meters

Cost: 10 sp

Drilling Shot (1/10) Exp: 20/100 - Granted

Shoot an arrow that spins, dealing increased damage

Multiplies base physical damage by 1.35

Cost: 10 sp

Tier 1

Piercing Shot (1/10) Exp: 25/200 - Granted

Shoot an arrow that ignores 5.0% of target's hardness

If physical damage is dealt, arrow pierces through target

After piercing, physical damage to any secondary target is reduced by the hardness of the primary target

After piercing, magical damage to any secondary target is reduced by the appropriate resistance of the primary target
Effect can recurse indefinitely
Cost: 25 sp

Strong Draw (1/10) Exp: 0/200 - Granted
Bow draw weight multiplied by 1.1
Toggleable

Tier 2

Endless Quiver (10/10) - Granted
Conjure a copy of any arrow in your possession
Copy persists for 10 minutes
Cost: 10.0 sp
Additional mp cost for enchanted arrows

Sniper Shot (3/10) Exp: 300/1,600 - Granted
Fire a powerful charged shot with extreme range
Multiply physical damage by 5.5
Arrow is not affected by gravity or wind within 1 km
Cost: 100 sp
Charge time: 10 s

Tier 3

Bleeder Shot (1/10) Exp: 100/800 - Granted
Shoot an arrow that drains the target's blood
Effect only activates if physical damage is dealt to health
Target bleeds freely for 1 minutes until wound is sealed
Cost: 200 sp

Multishot (1/10) Exp: 70/800 - Granted
Fire an arrow that splits into 2 projectiles
Each projectile deals 10% of the original damage
Arrows fly in a fan up to 45 degrees wide, equally spaced
Cost: 10 mp

Survivalist Utility

Tier 1

Attract (6/10) Exp: 1,270/3,200 - Granted

Draw targeted objects toward the palm of your hand

Objects must be reasonably similar and small enough to be comfortably held

Maximum distributed force: 114 N (fcs)

Range: 30 m

Cost: 10 mp

Utility Auras

Tier 1

Energy Well (10/10) - Granted

Convert mana to stamina and transfer to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 61.6 sp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 61.6 meters

Tier 3

Empire of Brawn (2/10) Exp: 1,200/1,600 - Granted

Boost Strength by 123 for all entities

Range: 12.3 meters

Cost: 40 mp/s

Empire of Drive (2/10) Exp: 1,200/1,600 - Granted

Boost Recovery by up to 123 for all entities

Boost Vigor by up to 123 for all entities

Boost Clarity by up to 123 for all entities

Maximum Recovery boost is capped by the active Strength boost from Empire of Brawn

Maximum Vigor boost is capped by the active Endurance boost from Empire of Grit

Maximum Clarity boost is capped by the active Focus boost from Empire of Will

Range: 12.3 meters

Cost: 40 mp/s

Empire of Grit (2/10) Exp: 1,200/1,600 - Granted

Boost Endurance by 123 for all entities

Range: 12.3 meters

Cost: 40 mp/s

Empire of Will (2/10) Exp: 1,200/1,600 - Granted

Boost Focus by 123 for all entities

Range: 12.3 meters

Cost: 40 mp/s

Free Skill Points: 1

Energy Well had come first. At its twenty percent base efficiency, it was easy for Rain to simply throw mana at, which in turn made it the perfect tool for leveling Unity on Ameliah's side. With the stamina that came as a byproduct, Rain had maxed Mana Vent, prioritizing it as the skill that made the biggest difference to his overall survivability. Then came Airwalk.

While he'd made good headway in ranking up the mobility skill, the best he'd managed thus far was five slow steps without falling flat on his face. It didn't feel like much, despite knowing his rate of improvement to be utterly astounding. Most who took the skill never managed more than a step or two at a time, taken to maneuver in the heat of battle or when jumping a wide chasm or something. Ameliah was an outlier, able to walk calmly at silver while some goldplates struggled to run, and even she hadn't learned in the space of an afternoon. His rapid progress would probably have made her feel like punching him in the head had she not known how much work had gone into his preparations.

And those preparations were *important*. The contrast couldn't be more apparent, comparing Airwalk and Attract. He hadn't allocated a skill cradle for the latter, and while ranking it had been a simple matter of spamming, that only resulted in increasingly aggressive peltings by the objects he was attempting to call. Attract wasn't supposed to be trivial to learn or anything, but it was on the level of other common magic like Firebolt, not even remotely in the same difficulty league as Airwalk.

Only after pausing to assign it to a cradle had he made a breakthrough. With the spell untangled, a whole world of nuance had spread before him. He'd discovered the ability to vary the force on individual objects, even in mid-pull, and thus discovered the trick to not getting a mouthful of gravel. You had to ramp down the speed at the very end. It was like how an express elevator had to slow to avoid overshooting the desired floor. It still took practice, but he wouldn't have even known it was possible without the skill isolated in its cradle, let alone had a hope of weaving the mana flows through his armor's interference.

Speaking of mana flows, Mana Sight was a trip. Leveling it had been as simple as flipping on the active mode, boosting it with Channel Mastery, then leaving it running. With each rank, his vision had become clearer and clearer until he could see in mana better than he could in light. 'Flows' was definitely the correct word. Outside the soul, essence was all fields and zones with various flavors and colors. Mana was much more active, streaming through the patterns of skills and—when cast poorly—leaking gaseously to join the ambient mana. Weather was an apt analogy for ambient mana, essence being better likened to climate.

The facet of Mana Sight that mattered most to Rain was its impact on his cast quality. The fuzzy view he'd gotten from Mana Manipulation, then refined through study of essence, had been taken to the next level. It did diddly-squat for stamina-using skills like Airwalk, but for his spells, it was as if a missing puzzle piece had slotted into place. He could not only see the patterns but could begin to understand them. Commonalities stood out. Similarities in sections of function. Subroutines—to be studied, identified, and reverse-engineered. The path to custom skills wasn't open, but he could see the first step up the mountain. The first step of many. It was like staring at an arcane snippet on MSDN and contemplating rewriting the entirety of Windows.

Oh, the things I'd fix.

Rain chuckled at the audacity of the thought, spinning a conjured arrow through his fingers. He was presently idle, even his ramscoops on pause as he rested beside Ameliah on the shore of the subterranean lake. She was either working on her own answer to ramscoops or had already gone to bed. He'd already finished his own work and slept, leaving keeping watch as his only obligation. The small cavern felt cozy and magical, warmly lit by the golden glow of Radiance that painted their armor. At rank thirteen and well off the beaten path, it was the perfect place to rest before the sprint back to Threecore. Essence hung thick in the air, bubbling up from tiny cracks in the lake bed that extended beyond the range of Detection. Not enough for him to steal it from Ameliah, though.

With his latest ramscoop updates and their roving, he was actually doing okay despite his obscene mana usage. Ameliah wasn't. She'd been awakened far longer than he had and thus benefited from a stockpile of naturally-purified essence, but she'd burned through it all. Boosted Unity was expensive, and he couldn't cover her half with Essence Well effectively. Fifty mana a second—about what he could send at full efficiency—was nothing. It was about the same as her Winter-boosted regeneration. While they could have continued with transferred mana alone, there was no need to, and he wasn't about to leave her behind when a few hours of work could set her right.

He would never say it, not wanting to get killed, but lately, she'd been looking a little flabby in a spiritual sense. It was actually a good sign, meaning she was on the same path of growth that he was, albeit at a less explosive pace. Ramscoops—or whatever equivalent she came up with—would help. Prolonged lack of pressure had led to his own paling shriveling up like a grape on the way to raisin-hood, but his growing confidence in all things soul-related assured him that it wasn't an issue. It was just a symptom of the degree to which he'd outpaced his tree unlock schedule.

If anything, I think I can push even harder. Not right now, though. Plenty of other stuff to catch up on.

Summoning a zone codex and still idly playing with the arrow, he began to read, only to be given pause two lines in. There'd been a hit on the Detection anchor he'd left at the crossroads. His sweep patterns quickly identified it as not one signal, but two on top of each other, a human and a tamed monster. Both were unknown to him, approaching the intersection from the direction of Threecore.

His arrow now frozen mid-twirl, Rain flipped Mana Sight to active and pushed it through Detection, which he'd been delighted to learn counted as a compatible 'sensory skill'. The combo didn't let him actually see through Detection in a physical sense—it was still just radar returns—but it did make mana into a valid target. Thus, he discovered that both the human and the monster had silver-level mana pools. A subsequent query revealed the human's mana to be almost entirely Light-aspect.

Illuminator Legruz? No, that's silly. Why would he leave Threecore just after his apprentices arrived? And Illuminators aren't Tamers. They've got crafting classes, so he wouldn't be alone out here. The Entente would never allow it. It's probably just some random silver headed for the Foundry bypass. A Tamer with Light-aspect Mana? Why? What's the point of that?

...Unless it's not a Tamer. The monster could belong to someone else. Damn it, the anchor's not good enough for me to tell who's chasing who. The signals overlap within the margin of error.

Biting his lip, Rain glanced at Ameliah, wondering whether he should wake her. This was back at the crossroads and likely had nothing to do with them. Very little time had passed, but the

pair were moving fast. He'd learn soon enough which path they chose, and the one that led toward their little cave was otherwise a dead end. They'd have no reason to take it.

Before the pair reached the intersection for him to find out, more signals appeared—ones he *did* recognize.

Mora! And the fledglings!? The beardy brothers, too? The unknown signal must be the Illuminator, then. Why's he so far out front? And where is he go—

He just turned our way.

"Hey," Rain said aloud, laying a hand on Ameliah's shoulder.

Her eyes sprung open. "Trouble?"

"Possibly," Rain replied, getting to his feet as she sat up. "Company, for sure." He moved to face the entrance. "Unless I'm very wrong, I think Illuminator Legruz is coming to say hello, riding some sort of monster. I don't have an ID lock, but that's the most reasonable scenario. Mora and her guards are chasing him straight toward us, and they brought the fledglings."

"What?" Ameliah asked as she rose to join him, summoning her bow. "You're sure they're coming here?"

"Unless they took a wrong turn. Our runes are on, so it's probably a tracking skill."

What is this guy's build? Is he a crafter or not?

"How long do we have?" Ameliah asked, dismissing her bow again.

"At the speed they were going, about a minute," Rain replied, realizing he was still holding the conjured arrow. He tossed it into the lake, dismissing the codex window. "They just left range of the anchor. Mora's group has sped up and just took the same turn. Either they're tracking us too, or they're tracking Legruz."

"If it's Legruz you're sensing," Ameliah said. "Why would he follow us?"

Rain searched the inside of his cheek with his tongue but didn't find the answer.

"Impulsiveness?" he guessed. "Mora did say he was a trial."

"You don't think Detection's wrong, do you? Counter-Divination?"

Rain shrugged. "It doesn't feel like it's being messed with. No matter the criteria I pick, the signals are clear, and they're following the tunnels perfectly. A Mentalist could probably make me hallucinate something that detailed, but not through Grannybrain's shell. Can you think of any other way to fool Detection so completely?"

Ameliah shook her head.

"Twenty seconds," Rain said, picking up the lead pair directly and estimating their speed. Mora and the others were now in the dead zone. She wouldn't have brought the fledglings if she was chasing a fugitive or something, but he still felt himself tensing up.

Occam said it was the Illuminator. Murphy said they were about to be in a fight for their lives.

Just before the twenty elapsed, light exploded from the cave entrance. Curtains of violet and blue came first, vibrant auroras slithering like ribbons into the chamber and chasing the walls to surround them. Next came showers of sparks—blue again—exploding in random clusters like silent fireworks. One cluster detonated practically in his face and sent his heart leaping into his throat, but the sparks only flared when they came into contact with Radiance. In addition to making a great nightlight, the inverted Offensive Aura gave him some token Light resistance, but this hadn't been an attack to be resisted.

It was showboating.

"Hello, hello, hello!" a male voice cried out in Zeelada, swarms of blazing stars whizzing through the room and detonating in riots of color, but Rain's eyes went to the enormous monster that had just surged out of the tunnel, heralded by the muffled thudding of dozens of padded feet.

It was...a cattipede.

That wasn't the system's name for it, but Rain's, decided in the spur of the moment. Tamed monsters didn't get health bars or title cards. The creature had sleek white fur and a snaky body the length and breadth of a fallen oak tree. It reminded him of a certain luck dragon, except Falkor hadn't had *nearly* so many legs. The monster's head was assuredly more catlike, too, with triangular ears, inquisitive feline eyes, and an adorably pink boop.

Movement from the cattipede's back tore Rain's eyes away from its majesty, and he beheld quite possibly the most flamboyant individual he'd ever seen.

Illuminator Legruz—for there could be no doubt at this point—wore a bedazzled white and blue jacket, open at the chest to reveal a shirt so puffy and white that Rain momentarily thought the man was smuggling a sheep. He stood upon the cattipede’s saddle, posing in a perfect ‘Y’. Tassels dangling from the arms of his jacket dripped glowing blue droplets—reminding Rain of those LED strings meant to evoke icicles. His hair was blue, too, styled in luxurious waves. As much as one might expect jewelry, however, he wore none, not that it was needed. His pale skin seemed to sparkle like freshly fallen snow.

In contrast to all that ostentatiousness, the man’s soul was nothing special. It had the liquid luster that marked him as silver, and its strength was nothing to sneeze at, but he and Ameliah were stronger. Legruz was a crafter—despite the cattipede he was linked to, the unknown Tracking skill he’d used to find them, and whatever else. Rain could just tell.

A second passed. Then two. The man kept up his pose as lights swirled around him, looking at the ceiling as if waiting for something.

The cattipede licked its lips, bored.

Unsure if he was expected to clap, Rain glanced at Ameliah, then cleared his throat. “Greetings of the light?”

“May it shine eternal!” Legruz hooted, his soul radiating pure elation as he hopped down to land with poise that was ruined by his rapid rush forward. Coming to a stop with his face uncomfortably close to Rain’s chest, the Illuminator closed his eyes and inhaled deeply before straightening and laying the back of a hand to his forehead with a satisfied sigh. “That’s the stuff.”

Did...he just...sniff me?

"Excuse you," Ameliah said, stepping forward protectively. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"No, no, no!" the man snapped—literally, he'd snapped his fingers with each word. "I know who I am. The question is: who are you? You are a mystery, I say! A most *delicious* mystery! When I learned I had missed you, my very heart shattered, and it was all I could do to gather my sleepy wards and convince that dreadful woman to let them accompany me! Your presence is so clean! I've never felt such order as that which wafts from you. It is as cool and pure and simply—"He choked, stricken, now laying his other hand to his forehead. "Where the Volcano is heat and motion, you are an unending torrent, yet smooth as...as... Words fail. And you! That spell you are using to link yourself to him! Beauty and strength! I must create!"

Of course he can see Unity. Drat. No point turning it off now.

The colors—which had toned down slightly—flared back to vibrancy as the man raised his hands. Seeming to draw threads of light from his tassels, he began weaving them into an image. He drew a stream, then a waterfall, plunging into a perfect reproduction of the lake behind them. So fantastic and utterly ridiculous was the show that Rain actually missed Mora and Bryz as they entered the chamber. The Entente leader's voice shook him out of it.

"Hello again, Mouse, Tiger," Mora said, looking worn as she negotiated her way around the cattipede. She stopped by its head, reaching up to rub behind its ear, which it seemed to appreciate. "Sorry about this. I tried to stop him, but—"

"Oh gods," Genn panted, stumbling out of the tunnel with his sister riding piggyback. "Why...is everyone...so fast?"

"Why are you so slow?" said one of the bearded Entente officers as the two of them entered. Never having learned their names, Rain temporarily dubbed them Leftbeard and Rightbeard. They both bore the same tower shields they'd held previously, but were now further burdened by a fledgling apiece. Remezzo and Letraue were promptly set down beside Bryz, all of them looking uncomfortable. They'd been carried the whole way, clearly, leaving them windswept, but unwinded.

"Stamina," Genn gasped pleadingly, motioning to Ameliah, who responded with Energy Well, excluding everyone else with her borrowed copy of IFF. The difference did not go unnoticed, judging from the curious looks of the other fledglings. They all looked down, clearly wondering why they weren't affected. Nor did the base action go unnoticed by the Illuminator.

"Magnificent!" Legruz screamed, abandoning his artwork—which was *shockingly* good for how little time he'd been working on it. Dancing on his toes with excitement, he rushed over to Ameliah, and it was Rain's turn to feel protective as she was subjected to *the sniff*. "A flawless cast!" he exclaimed as Rain interposed himself. The Illuminator backed off easily enough, now struggling to remain standing as he alternated hands to the forehead. "Smooth, smooth, smooth!"

"Really, I *am* sorry," Mora said with a tired sigh. "Legruz, one of these days, I'm just going to let you go out on your own. Getting yourself mauled might actually be what it takes for you to wise up. My job would be a lot easier if something chewed your legs off."

"You worry too much," Legruz said, waving a hand dismissively. "We saw nary a monster on the way, and I have Pitterpatter to protect me."

'Pitterpatter?' Rain mouthed as the cattipede stretched lustrously, the motion traveling along its body like a wave. All the fledglings stepped back except for Nim, who was inching closer, fingers extended toward that luxurious fur.

"And why do you think there weren't any monsters, huh?" Mora demanded, marching up to Legruz and pointing at Rain and Ameliah without looking at them. "If they hadn't cleared the way, you and your *cat* would be Kin food."

"Pfft, Kin," Legruz said, waving a hand again. "Pitterpatter would not be bothered by such disgusting and feeble things."

Mora sighed, muttering to herself. "Talking to you is useless." Straightening back up, she turned to face Rain and Ameliah. "Good work, you two. I wasn't expecting you to be so fast about it, let alone so thorough. I'll pay you in a minute."

Rain glanced at Legruz, wondering if it was okay for him to know about the secret quest, but Mora just sighed.

"Don't worry about him," she said. "I doubt he even heard a word I said. In fact, he doesn't pay attention to a damn thing if it doesn't interest him, and it looks like that's you today. Again, I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Ameliah said, dancing around Rain to keep him between her and the overexcited Illuminator.

"You must tell me your secrets!" Legruz demanded.

"We *must* do no such thing," Rain said. "I'd be willing to share a few things, maybe, if you tell us how you did that." He gestured toward the unfinished artwork, hanging forgotten in the air but no less vibrant for being neglected.

"How dare you!?" Legruz shouted, but his sudden affront wasn't from touchiness over Illuminator secrets—or related to Rain's words at all, apparently. He whirled on the cattipede, jabbing at it with a finger. "You take that back!"

The cattipede released a deep, unrepentant meow.

Legruz huffed even louder, perhaps perceiving some grievous insult, then proceeded to get into an argument with the elongated catbeast. Nim wisely vacated the area.

"Where's yours, anyway?" Leftbeard asked.

"Huh?" Rain asked. "I'm sorry?"

"Your pet slime," Leftbeard clarified, inclining his head toward Ameliah. "Or hers. The one that was on her shoulder before."

"Oh, he's around," Rain said, checking inside his soul. In the face of this ridiculousness, he supposed it didn't really matter if anyone realized Dozer could pop in and out of existence. "He'll come out once he's done sulking."

That got him a curious look, but there was no time for follow-up before Legruz was striding back toward them, beaming with his arms wide open. "Pitterpatter and I have decided! You will come back with us to Threecore!"

"No," Mora said flatly before Rain or Ameliah could reply. "They have business in the depths that doesn't involve babysitting a crazy person. You have apprentices to train."

"Dystees grant us shelter," said Rightbeard.

Rain made a placating gesture. "As I said, we'll be happy to tell you some things if you tell us some things. Maybe over a meal." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "There's a big fish thing in there that we were planning on eating. After that, though, we really do need to be going."

"Oh, poo!" Legruz declared, stomping a foot. He glanced back at Pitterpatter, then his grin returned. "Very well! We accept your offer of frontier sustenance, and then we shall come with you to wherever it is that you go! Now, to begin, I have just a few questions."

"Damn it, at least wait for the fish," Mora growled, moving toward Legruz and trying to herd him away without touching him. Of the two of them, Mora felt stronger despite being bronze. The way she was acting like he was poisonous likely meant she wasn't *allowed* to use force. Politics again.

"Any ideas?" Rain asked, turning to Ameliah.

Unfortunately, there was no help to be found there. "So, how do you find the taste of your own cooking?" she asked, struggling to contain her amusement. "Just a few questions. Ha!"