

45: Signal

Slowly, ever so slowly, Rain became aware of a ringing sound between his ears. He mumbled and stirred, disoriented. He'd been falling, and then...

"Woah!" He jerked awake. His mind rapidly replayed the events leading up to and including the fall as he struggled to sit up. Immediately, he noticed a problem with this: he wasn't lying down.

"Woah there, stop squirmin'. Guys, he's awake!"

Carten. So I'm not dead then. Why can't I move? Oh. It's like that scene from Star Wars where Chewie carries C3PO on his back after he gets ripped apart. Shit, I didn't get ripped apart, did I? Do I still have my arms?

Rain's world tilted as Carten shrugged off the crude harness that they had strapped him into so he could be carried like a backpack. Carten set him down on the ground and started untying him. "Ya gave us quite a scare there, Little Mouse. Don't try to move. I'll get ya free in a second. Didn't want your arms flappin' around on me."

Rain forced himself to wait as Carten undid the ropes that had been bundling him up, mentally dismissing his still-ringing alarm. His mind felt hazy and slow as if his thoughts were made from molasses. He blinked owlshly up at his companions, their faces swimming in the dim light. Even the rock walls of the tunnel he was in were sliding around worryingly. His eyes sluggishly tracked a Lunar Orb as it orbited Carten's head in a warped circle.

Am I...drugged? What is this?

"Rain, welcome back," Jamus said, smiling down at him as Carten freed his arms. Rain brought a hand up to his head feebly. The motion was difficult. Something was definitely wrong with him.

"Jamus, what happened? After...after I hit the ground."

"Ah, good, there's no memory loss," Jamus said. "You died is what happened. She brought you back."

Rain followed Jamus's finger. Ameliah was standing nearby, watching him. Carten freed his legs and pulled away the last of the harness.

"Died?" Rain said stupidly, struggling to sit up, his weak limbs trembling. Carten helped him into a sitting position and propped him against the wall.

"Yes and no," Ameliah said. "Your health was fully depleted, but you didn't actually die. I healed you, but your body was shattered. It was a very close thing."

"Shattered?" Rain said, finding it difficult to follow the conversation. "Something's wrong. I feel —"

"That's the dreamleaf I gave you," Ameliah said. "I had to knock you out so you didn't hurt yourself. Your bones haven't fully mended. It's been almost a full day since you fell."

"A full day? But I was just..." Rain licked his teeth. It felt like his tongue was covered in a woolen sock. He activated Purify to clear the horrible taste from his mouth. Immediately as he did so, his thoughts started to flow clearly again; whatever chemical he'd been dosed with had

been burned out of his bloodstream.

"Woah!" he said, canceling the skill. "That's trippy."

"You good now?" Carten asked.

"I think so. I still feel weak, but the...dreamleaf, was it? Yeah, I think Purify took care of it."

"Fascinating," Jamus said. "Ameliah has used that skill several times in your presence, but it didn't have that effect."

"Dreamleaf is both a medicine and a toxin. It depends upon your perspective," Ameliah said.

"Purify is weird. My advice is to not think about it too much. Can you stand?"

"I...think so."

Rain slowly got to his feet. His legs trembled, but he waved away any offer of help.

"Just don't do anything too strenuous," Ameliah said. "You are suffering from soulstrain due to overhealth. It's serious. Your body won't be able to take any more healing for a few days."

"This...doesn't feel like soulstrain. I just feel...weak," Rain said.

"It's a different type," Jamus said. "There are plenty of ways to injure your soul."

"Oh," Rain said. He was starting to feel a little better, but he wasn't going to be up for much more than walking for a while. He looked around in a sudden panic. "Hey, wait a minute, where's Val?"

"He's up there," Carten said, pointing along the tunnel they were in. Rain saw a light in the distance.

"Wait, alone? Isn't that...dangerous?"

"Yes," Ameliah said with a sigh. "But we saw a blue flee across the bridge when we crossed, and he's been impossible ever since. He insisted on taking the lead."

"Sounds about right," Rain said with a smile. "A blue, huh? What else did I miss?"

"Oh, it was amazin'!" Carten said, excitement clear in his voice. "Ameliah, she—"

"Hold on," Ameliah said. "If we're doing storytime, let's get Val back here. I don't want to go through this twice. Message: Val. Rain is awake. Come back."

She looked at Rain, her voice returning to normal as the echos of the spell faded. "I've got questions for you. That fall should have killed you. Sorry, but you just don't have the health to survive something like that."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Rain said. "I thought I was a goner." He licked his lips. "Say, anyone got any water? My mouth feels like it's full of sand."

Carten passed him a flask. "Go easy, we're low," he said. Rain accepted it and took a conservative drink, then restoppered it and handed it back. Belatedly, he realized that Carten's armor had taken some serious damage. It looked like it had been bent back into shape after sustaining some massive impact.

Probably the fall...

"Thanks," he said, then cleared his throat. "Well, when I went over, I knew I was probably screwed. All of a sudden, things seemed to...slow down, I guess? I don't know if it was magic or just the regular old realization of my impending death. I had just enough time to use a skill point on Force Ward before I hit. I remember right up to the actual impact, then nothing. It feels like it just happened."

"Hah, I knew it!" Carten said, moving to slap Rain on the back, but stopping himself as Ameliah shot him a warning look. He nodded to her, then turned to grin at Jamus. "Pay up."

Jamus sighed and reached for his belt pouch.

"Wait, you guys bet on how I survived?" Rain said, incredulous.

Jamus passed a few Tel to Carten, then retied his pouch. "No. Well, yes, but that isn't what this is. We didn't put money on that one. No, this is just the bet we made earlier about what skill you'd take."

"Oh," Rain said. He shook his head.

Adventurers.

The light of Val's orb merged with Ameliah's as he reached them, and he beamed at Rain.

"Rain! Welcome back to the land of the living!"

"Thanks, I guess," Rain scratched at his ear.

“So, Force Ward, huh? I only heard the tail end of that. I guess that means I won the bet, Jamus.”

“Yes, yes. Good job,” Jamus said, doffing his hat and running a hand through his wavy hair.

“What did you bet on, Jamus, if not Force Ward?” Rain asked.

“Oh, I thought Carten might have caught you or something. He wouldn’t say, and I didn’t think Force Ward would be strong enough to protect you.”

“Yeah, me neither. I’m going to have to check the numbers on that. I think this Strength ring also had something to do with—huh, I guess it’s had it.” Rain looked at the blackened ring adorning his finger. To confirm, he pulled up his menus to check his current status.

Yup. No more health boost for me. Damn it.

Attributes	
Richmond Rain Stroudwater	
Level 18	
Experience: 22749/22750	
Dynamo	
Health	200
Stamina	200
Mana	5100
Strength	10
Recovery	10
Endurance	10
Vigor	10
Focus	10
Clarity	200

Free Points

0

Statistics

	Total	Base	Modifier
Health	200	200	0 100%
H.Regen	100/day	100/day	0/day 100%
Stamina	200	200	0 100%
S.Regen	100/day	100/day	0/day 100%
Mana	5100	5100	0 100%
M.Regen	60.4/min	12.6/min	-2.1/min 495.6%

Movement Speed	10
Vision	10

Resistances

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

Rain pulled the charred ring off and slipped it into a pouch, dismissing his windows. He'd go through the rest of it later. He cleared his throat again. He still felt thirsty, but didn't want to use any more of their limited water.

"So, after I passed out, what happened?"

"Ooh, let me tell it!" said Carten.

"Might as well have lunch I suppose," Jamus said, shrugging out of his pack and bending to dig out a ration bar. He bit into it and made a face.

Rain smiled. Serves you right, Jamus, buying me all those rations. You couldn't have gotten some beef jerky or something?

His smile faded as the dark side of their supply situation crossed his mind. His eyes sought out the completion percentage for the lair, and he gave a relieved sigh when he saw that it was down to 23% remaining. They might get out of this yet.

Carten launched into the story, animatedly speaking through a mouth full of his own ration bar.

"So, the ram hits me, right? And then I'm flyin' and fallin', but Ameliah, she's all 'not today' and fuckin' wrecks the thing, Val's words not mine, and then she's like 'whoooosh' an'..."

Rain sat, thinking. After listening to Carten's retelling of the events since the chasm, the first thing he'd done was to thank Ameliah profusely for her heroic dive off the cliff to save him. She had accepted his thanks awkwardly, and he decided not to make too big a deal of her saving his life, not after how uncomfortable she had seemed while Carten was singing her praises. He'd have to find some way of thanking her properly once they were out of the lair.

He'd also used Essence Well to refill a good portion of Jamus's mana. Val and Ameliah had

already recovered to full by the time he'd woken up. Ameliah's stamina was only at around 3/4, though there wasn't much he could do about that. Her health was also down a sliver, which Rain guessed meant she was unable to heal herself for whatever reason. He had decided against asking her right now and added it to his ever-growing list of questions. He rubbed at his sore neck, then returned his attention to his skills menu.

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 (7/10) Exp: 753/4400

Increase all aura output by 0.7% for each rank in any aura

Effective boost: 41.3%

Tier 2

Aura IFF (5/10) Exp: 3027/4400

User may exempt entities from direct aura effects at will

Selected entities receive 50.0% aura output

Defensive Auras

Tier 2

Force Ward (3/10) Exp: 150/1600

Increase physical resistance by 12.717% for all entities

Range: 4.24 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

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

Refrigerate (6/10) Exp: 1468/1600

62-71 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 8.48 meters

Cost: 30 mp/s

Immolate (5/10) Exp: 566/1100

52-59 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 7.07 meters

Cost: 25 mp/s

Utility Auras

Tier 0

Purify (10/10)

Purify poison, corruption, and contamination

Range: 14.1 meters

Cost: 100 mp/min

Winter (7/10) Exp: 1842/2200

Boost M.Regen by 99% for all entities

Range: 9.89 meters

Cost: 7 mp/hr

Tier 1

Detection (10/10)

Sense selected items of interest

Not occluded by mundane materials

Resolution: 4.16 mm

Range: 14.1 meters

Cost: 10 mp/s

Essence Well (10/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 14.13 mp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 14.1 meters

Velocity (8/10) Exp: 998/5800

113.04% boost to speed for all entities

Range: 11.3 meters

Cost: 8 mp/s

Free Skill Points: 2

He'd ranked up in once in Detection, Velocity, and Aura Synergy, as well as twice in Force Ward. It was the last skill that he was currently trying to figure out.

Ok, so at rank three, it gives 12% mitigation at a cost of 1 mana per point of damage mitigated. It wasn't rank three when I hit, though. Humm, need a reference.

Rain popped open a panel displaying one of the other defensive auras to use as a guide for how the skill would have looked at rank 1.

Dark Ward (1/10) (+)
Increase dark resistance by 4.239% for all entities
Range: 1.41 meters
Cost: 1 mp/dmg mitigated

Humm. Aura Synergy leveled too, so that isn't quite accurate, but whatever, close enough. Call it 4% at 1 mp/dmg. I used all my modifiers, so...

Rain switched to Force Ward and activated it. He paused momentarily to investigate the skill, pressing a finger against his hand. It didn't feel any different, and there was no immediately obvious visual effect. Shrugging, he activated all of his modifiers, watching the displays for both Dark Ward and Force Ward. Unfortunately, only the skill he was using changed to reflect the active mods.

Force Ward (3/10) Exp: 150/1600
Increase physical resistance by 152.604% for all entities
Range: 55.1 meters
Cost: 54 mp/dmg mitigated

Wow, everyone in range is at 150% immune to physical damage right now. I wonder what that means? Do we heal if we get punched? I'll ask Jamus in a minute. First things first.

Amplify is 2x power, Aura Focus is 3x power, and Channel Mastery is 2x power. Force ward gives 12% base at level three, times 2, times 2, times 3, is more or less 12x12, so 144. This shows 152. Close enough for me. That means skill intensity boosts apply to the resistance percentage. Therefore, yesterday it was 4% times 12, so 48%.

Would reducing the damage I took from that fall by half have been enough? I guess so, seeing as I'm still alive and all... Wait, did I even have enough mana to cover that? The cost right now is pretty insane. Blocking 200 damage would cost me over 10,000 mana. Would that cause undermana, or would the skill just cancel? What does undermana even do, anyway? Memory loss? I can't remember the impact, which is probably for the best, but everything up to that point is crystal clear. I feel like I should be traumatized or something...

Best not to dwell on it. Where was I?

Oh, right. Yesterday, Force Ward would have cost 1 mp/dmg mitigated, times 54 for all the mods. That means, with a full mana pool, I could have blocked 100 damage with another 100 getting through because of the 50% rate. I didn't have full mana, maybe around half, so the skill would have blocked 50 damage, with me taking the remaining 50, plus whatever else was left from the fall after I ran out of mana. In hindsight, Extend Aura was a bad idea, but I kinda had other things on my mind.

Ameliah said my health was totally empty, so that means a fall of 50 meters caused at least 450 points of damage. It had to have been close. I don't think I'd have survived without the skill, or without the Strength ring, or without the immediate healing. I wonder if I reached terminal velocity?

Rain sighed and dropped the skill, dismissing all of his windows and switching back to Winter. He was running on fumes after transferring all of his mana to Jamus with Essence Well. He let his head fall back against the wall with a thump.

I really almost died. Did die, depending on your definition. That's three times now. Once in the sewer, once with the Kin, and now once more by falling off a cliff. I'm catching up to Val at a worrying rate. Wait, no, I forgot about the Musk Wolf. Four times.

Rain shivered and pulled himself up to his feet with the help of the wall. It was time to get going unless he wanted to add death by dehydration to the list.

"Ready to go?" Val asked.

Rain nodded. "Yup. So, tell me about this essence monster you saw."

Val grinned. "Crafty bugger. It's a little rodent thing, about the size of a Lago, but it's rank five and fast as lightning. It was sitting there on the bridge when we climbed out, mocking me. It stuck around just long enough for me to see its name, then scampered across. I would have had the damn thing, too, if Ameliah hadn't stopped me."

"You'd have gotten yourself killed, and you know it," Ameliah said. "There were more bats, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah," Val said. "I'd have been fine. I had plenty of mana by then."

Ameliah gave him a skeptical look as they started moving down the tunnel, but didn't make an issue out of it.

"Anyway," Val said. "If you see something called a 'Dire Shadowmonk', don't so much as look at it funny. It's alright if you're around, but I need 100% contribution. If it comes after you, don't block it, don't kick it, don't shoot it, don't do anything that might cause damage. Just get the hell out of the way and let me deal with it."

"I've been meaning to ask about that," Rain said. "Contribution...I've noticed it's different in here. Outside, I got credit for pointing out those slimes, even though I didn't actually do anything to them other than find them. In here, though, only stuff I've damaged directly has counted. Those bats, for example. Sending them into the wall gave me 100% contribution for the ones that fell to their deaths. Who determines contribution, and why did the rules change?"

Ameliah sighed. "In a lair, contribution is damage based only. Nothing else will affect it. Not healing, not mana regeneration, not even buffs like Velocity. As for why, that can wait. We're still in danger. You can ask all the questions you want when we're back on the surface."

"Right, sorry," he said. Ameliah had been very tolerant of Carten's loud description of the battle, though she had looked uncomfortable while the gregarious man had been lavishing her with praise. Rain shook his head and resolved to keep his mind on the issue at hand, namely their survival. He was feeling the absence of the Strength ring on his finger keenly.

He switched to Detection and released a pulse, searching for monsters. Immediately, he got a hit from straight behind them. He whirled, turning to face the source of the signal. There was only one, and it felt slippery to his mind, even though he had used a full-strength Detection Nova. He scanned the darkness, seeing nothing.

"What is it," Jamus asked, but Rain held up a hand for him to wait. It hadn't felt like the signal was moving toward them.

On a hunch, he used Detection Nova once more, this time searching for a very specific type of monster. Again, the signal came back to him, about 25 meters back along the tunnel in the darkness.

"Um, Val..." he whispered.

"Yeah?" Val asked, keeping his voice down to match.

"Your Shadowmonk," Rain said softly. "It's following us." He smiled. "And it's alone."