

083: Boon

"So, I have a question," Rain said, taking a bite of pork. He and Melka were currently having lunch in a tavern, considerably cleaner than the one from yesterday.

"You always have a question," said Mel, "I'm starting to regret answering the first one."

Rain laughed. "Yup. I promise I'll give it a rest after this one. It's just been bugging me for a while, and when they wouldn't let me into the training yard that just made it worse. I gots to know!"

"You have to know," Melka corrected, taking a bite of her own meal.

Rain waved a hand at her, "Sorry, it's a reference to something. I *have* to know."

Melka sighed. "Fine. One question."

Rain nodded. "How do physical skills work?" He speared another piece of meat and popped it into his mouth.

"That's way too broad," Melka said, shaking her head. "What do you mean, how do physical skills work?"

Rain finished chewing while he considered how to frame the issue. "Okay, so you are a warrior or something, right? You use two daggers, so I'm guessing you've got some skills in the 'Dagger Combat' tree. There's three skills in there at tier ze—foundation tier. How do they work?"

Melka frowned. "That is a very impolite question."

Rain sighed. "I'm not asking you to confirm whether or not you have them. Honestly, I don't see what the huge deal is with people hiding basic stuff like this. I'd see for myself if I ever saw you fight."

"You do the same thing," Melka said, pointing her fork at him.

"That's different," Rain said. "I just don't want to end up as a slave, chained to a post in a basement and forced to use support auras all day. It's less of an issue now that I can kinda take care of myself. Without this armor, I'd be a lot more paranoid."

Melka nodded. "I suppose I can see that. We've had problems with the nobles in the past doing that. Awakening people and forcing them to take particular skills and then locking them away. You don't need to worry about it. The Watch would intervene. We're not the Empire. We don't do slavery."

Rain smiled. "Good to know." He stopped himself from saying that they were all basically enslaved already, thanks to Velika. Melka did not respond well to any mention of the Citizen, for obvious reasons. "Anyway, my question is more general than those specific skills, I just want to use them as an example."

Melka sighed. "Fine. I have all three. Happy? What do you want to know about them?"

"Well," Rain said. "Lingering Bleed is a straightforward passive, it just makes all attacks with daggers bleed more, adding an actual 'bleed' status and some damage. There's tons of skills with effects like that. I've pretty much stopped asking why using a particular kind of weapon

matters when it comes to using a skill. That's a road that doesn't lead to any sort of useful discussion. It's the other two that I'm really interested in. Razor Flurry and Asp Kata."

"You have a very roundabout way of asking questions. Just get to the point."

Rain ignored the jab. Compared to arguing with Staavo, this was nothing. "Razor Flurry says 'attack with a rapid flurry of strikes with a pair of daggers.' My question there is, what happens when you use it? Does it, like, take over your arms and attack automatically or something?"

"Yes," Melka said. "That's exactly what it does."

Rain shuddered. "Isn't that, like, really creepy? What's it feel like?"

Melka shrugged. "You get used to it. The trick is to use it at the right time. The skill will target whatever you're focusing on, so you'd better make sure you're in range and have an opening. Otherwise, you'll get locked into the motion and hit nothing. Razor Flurry is fast, so it's not so bad, but something like Anvil Fall with a war hammer will leave you really open."

"Yeah, I can see that. Still, I'm glad I decided to become a mage. I don't like the idea of someone, no, *something* else controlling my body."

Melka shook her head. "It's not like that. It's your skill. Why would it be strange for it to guide your motions?"

Rain sighed. "It just is. Anyway, the other one. *Asp Kata*. That one just says 'dual dagger fighting technique.' Literally, that's it."

"It's a little more helpful for me," Melka said. "Does your interface not give you detailed descriptions?"

"It does," Rain said. "Usually, anyway. Not for any of the Katas, though. All of them that I've found are just as vague. 'Polearm fighting technique' and 'Sword fighting technique' and so forth. Why, what does yours say?"

Melka set down her fork, then swiped at the air a few times. "Asp Kata: Stances and forms for learning the technique of the asp. Requires dual daggers and consists of lightning-fast jabs and smooth, sweeping cuts." She looked back at him with a shrug. "I also get a feeling of what it's about and how it will look. It's hard to explain."

Rain blinked. "Wow, that is much more helpful. Hey, out of curiosity, what does it say for Purify? That's foundation tier too."

She shook her head. "I'm not answering that. One, I don't want to spend the time to find it, and two, you said you would only ask about one thing. If I answer, it will only encourage you, and then you will never stop."

Rain frowned. "Hey, I'm not that bad."

"Yes, you are," Melka said. "Here, I'll make you a deal. I'll answer whatever you want if you tell me why you don't know all of this already."

"Um...because of...reasons?" He scraped at his plate with his fork collecting the last few vegetables and finishing them off.

Melka snorted. "Not good enough."

Rain sighed, setting down his fork. "Fine. Let's at least finish with my original question. The Asp Kata doesn't sound like something you activate. How's it work?"

"It's like a pattern in your mind," Melka said. She drew one of her daggers and held it between them above the table. She started moving it side to side in a sinuous motion. Rain's eyes tracked it, and the longer he watched it, the more snakelike it appeared. "When you take the skill, it's like you get a whole set of instincts along with it."

Wait, like The Matrix? You take the skill, then you know kung-fu? He swallowed, still watching the weapon as it snaked through the air. "It teaches you to fight instantly?"

"No." Melka shook her head. "I said instincts. This," she gestured to the swaying dagger with her free hand, "is a section from the third-rank kata. You need to practice it. It's like...you can feel how your body should move. You start at the beginning and go through the motions of the first kata. Once you can get through the whole thing, the skill will advance, and then you can start learning the second kata." She stopped the snake-like motion. Rain blinked and shook his head. He'd been watching it, entranced. *Wow, that's dangerous. Some mental effect? I forgot where I was for a moment. Fuck. Now I'm thinking about that ridiculous Face Stab skill. It's only tier 1, so she probably has it. I think it would be better not to ask.*

Melka sat back in her chair. "Satisfied?"

Rain nodded, resisting the urge to slip on his helmet again now that he was done eating. "Actually, yes. That makes sense, it's just...different from how my magic works. I think I understand a lot more now. Active physical skills are fixed, but the katas are like a library of moves that you can chain together freely to fight. They really don't level with experience?"

Melka nodded. "Not all skills do. Some have other methods for advancement."

Rain rubbed at his stubble. It was time to shave again. *I think I see why they wouldn't let me into the training yard now. Letting people watch seems like a bad idea, as if you know the moves, you know how to counter them. Damn it, I wanted to see the asshole Pokémon trainer. 'Protecting the secrets of the Watch'... Bah, ridiculous. I'll learn how it all works eventually. I wonder if I can get Melka to teach me the first kata. There shouldn't be anything stopping me from learning the moves the hard way... Except time.*

Any further discussion was interrupted as a young boy ran up to the table. "Oi, you're the Night Cleaner, right?" said the kid. "I've got a message for you."

Rain sighed. "My name is Rain, not Night Cleaner."

Melka laughed. "Stop fighting it."

Rain swore under his breath, then looked at the kid. "What message?"

The boy stood straight and took on a formal posture. "Lord Arta Rill formally greets the Guild adventurer Rain, known as the Night Cleaner. I would like to have a brief discussion with you at your earliest convenience. Please join me at my estate. Do not pay the boy. He has already been compensated." The boy relaxed as the message ended.

"Shit," Rain said, shaking his head. *I knew something like this would happen eventually, but I'm not ready.* He looked at Melka. "You think I should go?"

Melka shrugged. "He'll track you down, one way or another. I'd say we better go see what he wants." She turned to the boy. "Thank you, you may go."

The boy didn't move, looking at Rain hopefully. "Now, I know the message said I'd been paid, but I take my job serious, I do. I could have left that bit off, but I didn't." He shifted his gaze from Rain to Melka. "That's worth something, ain't it?"

Rain laughed and gave the kid a few copper coins from his pouch. He didn't bother to count. It should be enough for a meal or two, even with the rising price of food in the city. "There you go."

"Thanks," said the kid. "Want me to show you where the Rills live? No charge. He said I was to show you if you didn't know."

"That's alright," Rain said. "I think I've got a pretty good idea."

"Right," said the kid. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Cleaner."

Rain sighed as the kid scampered off.

The thick page of the book of children's stories made a soft sound as Rain turned it. He was currently sitting in a room of Lord Rill's mansion, probably the first room that he'd been in that wouldn't have significantly benefited from a concentrated dose of Purify. The floor was marble, and the chairs were plushly upholstered. He'd felt nervous at first, but that had quickly been replaced with boredom, leading to him taking out his new books. He'd tried a bit of the others first, before settling on this one. It best suited his current mood.

Though each individual story was simple, reading them was fascinating in itself. The stories were alien, yet familiar in many ways. There were parables about honor and glory, mixed in with straightforward tales of excitement and adventure, even the fighting of dragons. The system was omnipresent in many of them as a plot device, depicted in different ways, and with differing degrees of believability. He was only around a third of the way through the book, but already he was glad that he had bought it. It was expensive, but the entertainment was worth it. Plus, he was counting on being able to sell it and the others later.

He looked up at a sudden sound. Melka was playing with a statue, tipping it with her foot. She'd let it slip, causing it to wobble around noisily on its base. He cleared his throat. "You sure you don't want to read one of these?"

Melka scoffed. "I'm good. I can't believe you're reading with your helmet on."

I suppose these would be boring for her. Still, better than nothing. What the hell is taking him so long?

He used Detection, searching for entities. He'd long-since singled out Lord Rill with IFF and had been tracking him as he moved through his manor. The Detection pulse returned, indicating a signal moving toward them. He sat up abruptly, closing his book.

Melka looked over at him, raising an eyebrow. The statue wobbled on its base, then settled to a halt just as the door opened, revealing the man that Velika had placed in charge of the day-to-day operation of Fel Sadanis.

Lord Rill was an older man, but not decrepit. He had light gray hair combed back neatly and was wearing an elaborate suit of blue and gold. While he bore no visible weapons, there was an air of danger around him that was more than just the power of his station. Rain had done his research before coming here, and he knew that the man was under level ten and fought with a rapier. He rarely carried it, however, other than when he was training his children. He had little need to. The Rills were an old family, Arta having inherited his build from his father, who inherited it from his father before him.

That was how it worked with noble families. It wasn't the same thing as the nobility Rain knew of from history. There was no powerful king or queen for them to curry favor with, at least not here. Now that the city fell under the authority of the DKE, that would likely change, but not overnight. As for how you got nobles, typically, a powerful adventurer would retire, start a family, and pass down their legacy to their children. That meant money, equipment, and knowledge, not to mention literal power in the form of accolades. They would awaken their children, then pass on the spoils that they had earned in their careers.

Some inheritors went on to join the Guild and to make their own way in the world, but not all. Those that didn't became the start of their own noble houses, fiercely guarding their secrets and lording their power over those less fortunate than themselves in the most literal sense of the word. After a few generations, you got, well, Lord Rill. The rumor was that his house was in decline, but you wouldn't know it to look at him.

"Ah, good. They told me you had arrived," the noble said, closing the door behind himself. A flicker of annoyance was visible on his face, quickly hidden.

Rain rushed to stand, then inclined his head formally. "It is an honor to meet you, Lord Rill," he said, keeping his voice neutral. *A little flattery never hurts, and from what I've heard about this guy, he expects it. I'm not about to bow and scrape, though. I could probably kick his ass, or at least make him have a very bad day, but that's not the point. He has the power thanks to Velika, and I can't kick her ass. Besides, we live in a society, such as it is.*

Rill returned the bow with more than just a head tilt, bending far lower than Rain had. Rain blinked in surprise as the man spoke formally. "It is an honor to meet you as well, Guilder Rain." He rose, then looked at Melka—who was still seated—with a frown.

Guilder, huh? At least he didn't call me Night Cleaner.

Melka rolled her eyes and got to her feet. "Fine," she gave the barest shadow of a bow. "Happy?"

Rill snorted. "No. My servants informed me that you refused to leave, but I will not make an issue of it. I have nothing but respect for the Watch, but please know that this conversation is intended to be between Rain and myself."

Melka rolled her eyes as Rill looked back to Rain. "There are many pressing duties that require my attention," he said, "so I must keep this conversation brief. I felt that it was essential to handle this matter personally, however. It has not escaped my attention that you have been performing a vital service for the continued survival of the city."

Rain was taken aback. This wasn't how he'd expected things to start off. "Umm, thanks? I'm just doing my part."

"Nonsense," Rill said, "you have been instrumental. Without Purify, the commons would be dying in the streets. I don't know what you have heard about me, but I really do care. Stability is good for all of us, common and noble alike."

Rain nodded. "I agree with that, I suppose."

"That is good," Rill said, smiling. "I know that you have been simply obeying the commands of our honorable Citizen. While it was her wish for such work to go unrewarded, I do not share this opinion. Unfortunately, I have not been able to sway her on this matter."

Wow, this guy is...not an ass? He nodded his head, not having anything to say in response.

"While that is the case," Lord Rill continued, "she has not forbidden me from doing as I wish with my own resources. To that end, please accept this small gift for service to the city." He reached into a pocket, pulling out an ornate black-enameled box. He offered it to Rain. "With my personal thanks."

Rain accepted the box but didn't open it. He already knew what was inside, thanks to Detection. Tel were one of the things that he habitually scanned for, and he'd known that Rill had been carrying a lot of them before he'd even opened the door. A follow-up pulse as Rill had pulled out the box had confirmed that many of the Tel were inside of it. *Holy shit.*

He bowed again, deeper this time, saying nothing. He was thankful that his helmet would hide the expression on his face. The signal from the box was strong, feeling like his pouch had felt after the trip north. Before he'd paid off his fine, that was. He'd already considered his money problems to be solved after learning about the rates he could charge for mana, but this was immediate and real. He straightened, struggling for words and ultimately deciding to play it off like it was no big deal. "Thank you, Lord Rill. Your appreciation is reward enough."

Rill smiled. "Good, I am glad that you feel this way. It is below ones such as us to obsess over material wealth. Still, I hope that my gift will help you in further service to the city and the house of Rill. Consider it a token of my appreciation, and a promise of a future of collaboration between us."

Ah, there it is. That's more like a noble. Rain nodded, not trusting himself to say anything without putting his foot in his mouth.

Rill glanced at Melka, then back at Rain. "Now, to business. As you know, Citizen Sadanis has claimed the Fells for her own use. She will be leading an expedition into the lair tomorrow morning, and she has requested that you join her. Ninth bell."

Rain paled. Talking to Rill was one thing, but the thought of being in the same room with Velika was terrifying, especially after learning what she'd done. He looked over his shoulder at Melka, then back at lord Rill. "And if I refuse?"

"Don't refuse," he said, fixing Rain with a flat expression. "The Citizen's requests are...not requests. They are commands. She does not react well when she is disobeyed. You would be wise to do as she asks."

"And if she asks me to do something...distasteful?"

Lord Rill frowned. "I will speak plainly with you, though it is dangerous for me to do so. Citizen Sadanis is not a natural ruler. She is not stupid, but neither is she fit for command. She has no appreciation for subtlety, reciprocity, nor restraint. It is only through great effort that I have been able to keep things from falling apart completely. She does not wish to rule. She desires

power but shirks responsibility. It is a recipe for disaster, and only by playing by her rules can we exert some measure of control."

Wow, that is speaking plainly, alright. Damn. Does he have a deathwish?

Rill laughed softly, then looked at Melka. "Do not look so shocked. Did you think me a fool? I have already discussed this with your masters." He looked back at Rain. "All we can do is mitigate the damage. By accepting the yoke, the ox may guide the cart, so long as he strays not from the path." He chuckled to himself. "Sometimes, there is great wisdom in peasant sayings."

Rain shook his head. "What if she asks me to kill someone because they look at her wrong? I'm supposed to just do it?"

Rill shook his head. "She will not, most likely. While many died in the attack, none of those deaths were at her hand. She subdued the Watch without killing a single member—no small feat, and not something that she would have done unintentionally." Rill's eyes flicked to Melka. She had raised her hand to her throat, but dropped it when she saw them looking.

Rill looked back at Rain and continued. "She is operating under restrictions placed upon her by Citizen Westbridge, or by the DKE as a whole." He shook his head. "Please do not take this the wrong way, but perhaps it is too much for me to expect an adventurer to understand the politics at play. Trust me when I say that she will step lightly. She cannot afford the Watch to come to believe that the cost of removing her will be less than the cost of allowing her to remain in power."

Rain nodded, hiding his annoyance at the jab. He'd already come to a similar conclusion. "Oh, I understand," he said. "Politics is right. The whole thing with the dome is just an excuse for

them to take the city, that much is obvious. They don't want to piss off the Watch too badly, though, hence her restraint. They must be confident in her ability to keep things under control."

Rill nodded, but Melka shook her head. "Doesn't make sense." She made a fist at her side. "The woman is a fucking psychopath. They'd never put someone like that in charge if they had any choice in the matter. There's got to be something else. They want her to fail."

"You know her so well?" Rill said, raising an eyebrow at her. Melka scowled, but did not respond. "As I said, she is not stupid. Her commands thus far have been reasonable, and she will listen to reason if it is presented to her properly. Citizen Westbridge is the greater mystery. I would have thought he would have honored Halgrave's request to allow the Guild to depart."

"Yeah, me too," said Rain, nodding. "At first, I thought they wanted us in here to fuel the barrier, but the math doesn't check out. There's too many unawakened for a hundred or so Bronzeplates to matter."

Lord Rill nodded. "It is a mystery. Even Citizen Sadanis does not know the reason. I have heard her yelling at Westbridge many times now. It seems she has not mastered the use of her link to the other Citizens yet, as she always speaks aloud, and always to Westbridge."

"So, she can talk to him?" Rain said. "How's that work exactly? I've heard that the Citizens are linked somehow, but I keep getting conflicting information. This one guy even said that—"

Rill raised a hand. "I apologize, but I am afraid that I must soon return to my duties. There is still one more important matter that I need to discuss with you."

Damn. Rain nodded, setting aside his question.

Rill cleared his throat. "As you are aware, Citizen Sadanis is recruiting for her guard. Three of my children have decided to join. To my great shame, I have been unable to awaken them through my own power. You will no doubt have heard that my father made the foolish decision to harvest the lair that our family had curated for generations."

Rain nodded. He hadn't heard that specifically, but there were a lot of rumors flying around. It was hard to separate fact from fiction. He listened carefully as Rill continued.

"My children felt that joining the Guard is their best chance at achieving their awakening," he said. "It is indeed a great opportunity for them, and one that I support. Unfortunately, Citizen Sadanis was immediately pressured by the other families to include their children in the first expedition into the lair. After much argument, she decided to hold a random drawing. To ask her to include my family at this point would be unwise. Nevertheless, I have arranged for one of my children to be selected. My son, Arlo."

Rain nodded. "And you want me to keep him safe."

"Yes," Rill said, tapping a finger to his temple. "I do not know exactly what lies within the Lair, though I do have some general information. It is rank eleven, but with a wider than normal spread. It will prove incredibly dangerous for an unawakened, even one as well trained and equipped as my son. The Citizen will accompany you inside, of course, though I do not know to what extent she will assist. Her interest will lie in preventing anyone from destroying the heart. She may make her candidates fight, unawakened as they are. Should that be the case, my son will likely die. He is overconfident and reckless."

"Why don't you go in with them?" Rain asked. "I'm not the best fighter. I'm not sure I can do much. Why does she even want me, anyway?"

"I would, but she will not allow it. She wants to awaken six members at once, so that only leaves room for her, and for you, I suppose. As for why she chose you, it is no mystery, not once you know that the Fells is a swamp. Your Purify aura will make the experience much less of a...trial."

Melka snorted. "Fucking right it will."

"Ah, yes. You would know, wouldn't you?" Rill said, nodding to her. "I am well aware that the Watch does not wish for the details of the Fells to be known, but I would appreciate it if you could tell Rain of your own awakening. It will be important for him to know what to expect. There is nothing to be gained by secrecy any longer."

Melka nodded. "I would have told him anyway." She stalked forward, pointing a finger at the noble. "Don't think I'm buying that you're on our side. You're skilled, old man, but not that skilled. I can't sense your lies, but I can't sense the truth from you either. You're just in this for the power. The fact that you rigged the lottery proves it. You'd better remember that this city belongs to the Watch when we take it back."

Rain stared at her. *Wow, she does not like nobles.*

"Come on, Rain. Let's go," she said, ignoring Rill's frown.

"Don't worry, I'll try to keep everyone safe, not just your son," Rain said, inclining his head to Lord Rill.

"Good," Rill said. "That is all I can ask. In the future, I may have more tasks for you. I think you will find that I can be most generous to those that are useful to me." He flicked his eyes to Melka, then back to Rain. "Whatever ties you have to the Watch, they are not worth antagonizing the Citizen. It might be best for you to cease your association with them."

"Fuck you too," Melka said. "Rain, don't listen to this snake. He works for the enemy."

Rill sighed. "I am sorry that you do not understand, officer Melka." He opened the door, then nodded to Rain. "The servants will see you out. Think about what I said. And once more, I thank you. My son may be brash, but he is still my blood. I would hate to see anything happen to him." With that, he left, leaving Rain and Melka alone in the room.

Rain grimaced. Melka had already been testy after being made to wait, but now she looked like she was positively fuming. She glared at him, then sighed, her expression softening.

"Don't like nobles, I take it?" Rain said.

She shook her head. "It's not because of him. Or at least, not all of it. It's her," she said.

"Yeah," Rain said, nodding. "Okay, let's just go then. I need to get a few things if I'm doing this."

Rain and Melka followed a servant out of Rill's estate, then Rain led the way toward the Guild square. He was acutely aware of the weight of the box of Tel in his pouch, though it was much lighter than the books he was lugging along in his bag. Those had been an extreme expense this morning, but now, they didn't seem so expensive after all. It was time to see if there was anything worth buying in the shop near the Guild, now that he had crystal to burn.

When he approached the square, he noted that someone had been using cold magic again. The entire area was covered in a layer of ice, slowly melting in the warm air. Unsurprisingly, there weren't many people around.

Melka sighed. "Why in the middle of the city?" She stepped onto the ice, gliding with all the grace of an Olympic skater. "I need to talk to that woman."

"Which woman?" Rain said, raising an eyebrow behind his helmet. "Mahria?"

Melka nodded. "This was obviously her doing. Something like this would get her thrown out of the city if we were still in charge. She's a troublemaker, always pushing the boundary."

He shrugged, hiding a smile. "I barely know her, but I can see why you'd say that. She doesn't have very nice things to say about the Watch, either." His smile faded as he thought about his trip to the mine. *As if I need another source of stress, now I'm thinking about Lavarro. I wonder what she's up to. Does she know that her daughter is trapped in here? At least she can't get to me. Silver lining to being trapped in a reverse snowglobe.*

He skidded his way across the square with considerably less grace than Melka, heading for the shop that catered to the Guild adventurers. He now recognized the flowing script above the door as the written form of Zeelada. Of course, he still had no idea what it said. He hadn't spent nearly enough time with the language book.

The interior of the shop was laid out with various displays of armor and weaponry as he remembered, and the same clerk was behind the counter, wearing the same green tunic as a uniform. *What did I call him? Oh, right, 'random shop guy.'* *We meet again.* The man had given him an attitude the last time he came in here, but that was only after he'd learned that Rain was practically broke. The place was otherwise empty.

“Ah,” random shop guy said, looking up as Rain came in. “Welcome, welcome. I have not seen you before. Is there anything I can assist you with?”

Rain glanced at him, then at the sword he’d examined the last time, the one worth as much as a used car. It was still there. He shook his head. “I’ll just browse, thank you.” It looked like the man didn’t recognize his voice. That was a good thing. As for the sword, he was feeling rich, but not *that* rich. Besides, he’d put his eye out.

He walked through the room, examining the wares on offer. He quickly realized that most of the items were mundane—simple swords, maces, axes, and the like, clearly well-made, but not magical. By hovering his hand over them and expelling a puff of mana with Mana Manipulation, he could tell as much by the lack of resonance. The magical weapons and armor appeared to all be laid out along the wall near the sword. It wasn’t a vast selection. The whole store looked a bit picked-over.

He went over to inspect them. He wasn’t looking for a weapon, but seeing Melka’s daggers had him wondering about what kind of things were out there. The sword would be a good starting point.

Razorsteel Sword

- Durability: 204/204
- Hardness: 182
- Material: Force Steel
- Mana Capacitance Rune
 - 404/2000 mp
 - Import Efficiency: 80%
 - Export Efficiency: 0%
- Greater Sharpness Rune
 - 49% increase to damage to all strikes when using a sword-aspect skill, 20mp/strike
 - 94% increase to sharpness, 20mp/day

Huh, Greater Sharpness? That's better than what was on Melka's daggers. About twice as good, actually. Interesting. The capacitance rune is better, too. I can see why it's so expensive. I'm betting the fact that nobody has bought it means that it's too pricey for most of the adventurers around here. For someone who uses swords, though, this would be pretty great. It doesn't show the properties for the metal like my armor does, though. Weird. He shrugged. How 'bout this knobby-looking shield?

Briarbark Shield

- Durability: 403/403
- Hardness: 147
- Material: Chemical Oak
 - Mana Conversion: 0%
 - Mana Saturation NA
 - Mana Dissipation NA
- Mana Capacitance Rune
 - 309/1000 mp
 - Import Efficiency: 100%
 - Export Efficiency: 0%
- Thorns Rune
 - Reflect 23% of damaged blocked as chemical damage, 2 mp / dmg returned.

Oh, damage reflection. Cool. Chemical Oak? How do you make that? Do you have to, like, grow it that way, or...? Whatever. It doesn't look like it would be much use against magic. It's showing the material properties this time for whatever reason. Not like it matters. The durability is a bit crap. It would break after only a few hits. I wonder how much it costs. There's no price tag...

He debated asking the clerk but decided against it as he didn't want to be hovered over. He touched a greenish-tinged metal breastplate next. *Time to see how Tallheart stacks up.*

Chemsteel Breastplate

- Durability: 4103/4103
- Hardness: 124
- Material: Chemical Steel
 - Mana Conversion: 43%
 - Mana Saturation 0/4,373 mp
 - Mana Dissipation 22 mp/s
- Mana Capacitance Rune
 - 277/1000 mp
 - Import Efficiency: 24%
 - Export Efficiency: 0%
- Durability Rune [Active]
 - +3000 durability, 20 mp/day
- Chemical Resistance Rune [Active]
 - +20 chemical resistance, 15 mp/day

Yeah, Tallheart wins. These numbers suck. This thing is a hell of a lot easier to charge, but look, the mana conversion blows. That means some magic will get through. That must be why Tallheart made mine the way it is. Oh, wait a damn second here. How do you repair this thing if it doesn't have a self-repair feature? It's at full durability. It wouldn't have started there because of the boosting rune, so someone had to have repaired it. How? There must be a repair skill. Note to self: spend a bit more time looking at the crafting trees.

"Anything good?" Melka said. "Thinking of changing armor?"

Rain shook his head. "No, mine is better. This has chemical resistance, which would be good for where I'm going, but everything else is just...no. Plus, it's ugly. I've got no desire to dress up like a metal olive."

"Where did you get that armor, anyway?" Melka asked. "I've never seen anything like it. It's enchanted, clearly. What's on it?"

"No comment," Rain said. *Damn it, Tallheart, I hope you're okay. Has Ameliah found you yet?*

"Something from your backer?" Melka asked.

"Huh?" Rain said. "Backer?"

Melka shrugged. "I was surprised when you took Rill's gift. You clearly don't need it, with armor like that. I was figuring that you'd be insulted. Whoever you're attached to, they must be someone significant. Too significant for Fel Sadanis. I'd be careful if I were you. You wouldn't want them to think you're working for Rill now."

Rain laughed. "I don't have a backer," he glanced over at the clerk, making sure he wasn't listening in. "I'm actually poor as shit. That box has got more Tel in it than what's in my pouch by an order of magnitude."

"I can't read you at all, so I can't tell if you're joking." She shook her head. "Sorry, it's just so unbelievable."

"Can't read me?" Rain asked. "You mean with that lie-detector thing that everyone in the Watch seems to have? Is it a skill? Like a 'Skill' skill? You'll have to tell me how that works sometime."

Melka laughed. "No, I don't. We've got our secrets, just as you seem to have yours."

Rain nodded. "Fair. Anyway, what I'm looking for is something to help with resistances. Chemical, for the lair, and heat and cold for other reasons. Oh, and mental and arcane and... yeah, all of them, actually. Any idea what kind of thing I should look for?"

Melka shrugged. "Armor usually has that kind of stuff. If you're not going to replace yours, then your best bet is a ring or an amulet. It will be ungodly expensive, though, if you want a decent boost. Honestly, you're probably fine just from the fact that you're all wrapped up in metal already."

"Damn," Rain said. "I guess I need to ask the random shop guy. I am definitely not fine."

He walked over to the counter, and the man immediately greeted him. "Something catch your eye?" If he was fazed at all by the famous adventurer in his shop, he didn't show it. There was no recognition on his face at all, in fact.

He's probably used to adventurers, and I'm no Silverplate. This is good. I'm happy that he hasn't heard of me. I can feel my head deflating.

"Yeah," Rain said after a moment of looking across the counter. "I'm looking for something to boost resistances, something that isn't armor. Got anything like that?"

The man nodded. "I have a few ward-charms left. Single-use, but they'll give you fifty points of resistance for a few hours."

Rain considered, then shook his head. "I was looking for something more permanent. Like an amulet or a ring or something."

The man spread his hands in a gesture of apology. "I'm afraid we don't have anything like that at the moment. I'd say check back next week, but obviously our shipment is going to be... delayed."

"Damn," Rain said. "How about something that boosts health or mana directly?"

The man shook his head. "Sorry. Not a lot of call for that kind of thing. Too inefficient. You'd have to place a special order, which, again, won't be filled any time soon. Mostly what we've got is weapons and armor. I see that you're without a weapon. Perhaps you would be interested in that sword you were examining? It is one of our finest pieces. It has a greater sharpness enchantment—no small thing, I tell you."

Rain shook his head. "I'm not a swordsman. The only thing I even remotely know how to use is a staff, or maybe a spear. Too inconvenient to carry around, though."

The man smiled. "I've got just the thing." He walked over to the wall, Rain following somewhat reluctantly. He was getting major car salesman vibes from random shop guy now. He didn't like car salesmen, and he didn't want to part with his newfound wealth for something that he didn't need. He blinked as the man reached up to grab a small metal bar off the wall.

"This is a Quickstaff," the man said, handing it to him. "Convenience is its main feature. It is otherwise fairly unimpressive, but it seems you only want a backup, not a primary weapon. If you don't have Mana Manipulation, then I also have an activation stone that I can—Ah. Never mind."

Rain had pushed his mana into the bar, smiling after reading the description. The 20 cm rod jumped in his hand, rapidly telescoping out to the length of a full quarterstaff. It was made of steel and was quite heavy, but not as bad as he would have expected. It wasn't hollow, that was for sure. Magic was involved. He grasped it with both hands, falling into one of the stances that Val had tried to teach him. "Nice. How much?"

"Three hundred and nine," the man replied immediately. "I know, I know, that is a lot for something without any damage boost whatsoever, but the enchantment is rare. The metal is

durable, and it counts as a staff for all intents and purposes. It will allow you to use staff skills, and it is small enough to be tucked into a pocket."

"Humm," Rain said, making a few experimental moves with the staff. *Damn it, this thing is fantastic and I want it. But 300 Tel... I just got this money, and I don't really need a weapon. I still need to go buy healing scrolls and potions and whatever else. I've gotta check with Mlem and with Myth and Reason to see if they're selling anything that might keep me alive. This staff won't do it. I can't justify it, unless...*

He glanced at the shopkeeper. "How do you charge all this stuff?" He took his hand off the staff to gesture at all the equipment lining the wall. "I don't see a way to deactivate the enchantments, and they are all kinda low."

"Ah, that little issue," The shopkeeper said. "The Havenheild Company prides itself on providing adventurers with all the services that they require, including item repair and recharge. The owner of this branch is a powerful mage, though not a fighter. He manages the stock as well. I will admit that he has been struggling under the current conditions, even after spending the night at the Watch stronghold. You are proposing that you charge some of the items in exchange for a discount on the staff?"

Rain nodded.

The shopkeeper considered. "I find this agreeable. I can charge a higher price for fully charged equipment. However, I will not make any accommodation for the current conditions of the city. I will give you, say, four Tel per thousand mana charged. Store credit, naturally."

"Ten," Rain said. "That is the standard rate. And per mana spent, not charged."

The man shook his head. "I have a business to run."

Damn car salesman. Well, I might not like them, but I know how to deal with them. He grinned beneath his helmet, then spun the staff to plant the end on the floor. He did his best to loom. "Ten."

Melka chuckled. "Here we go again."