

147: Easy

Rain yawned, then rubbed at his eyes. It was before dawn, and he was sitting on the ground in the clearing at the entrance to the Ashen Jungle. He was wearing his armor once more, with his helmet and shield lying nearby. Tallheart's alterations had made a world of difference, and the tightness was gone. The weight of the enchantments remained, but he found it comforting. Like a blanket.

Idly, he reached over to the unknown fruit pile next to him and selected a small yellowish one with black speckles. After a brief inspection and a sniff check, he took a bite, chewing slowly as he evaluated the flavor.

Citrus of some kind. Lots of seeds. Flavor is...pretty good, actually. Not overpowering.

He shrugged, then popped the rest of the fruit into his mouth and returned his attention to the puzzle sitting on his lap. The most surprising thing about the thing was that the design was familiar. It was doubtless a coincidence, but he'd seen its exact twin at a dusty little Irish pub, right down to the authentic horseshoes. That didn't mean he had any idea how to solve it, however.

Rain pulled gently on the ring, careful not to damage the metal. Tallheart had said brute force was not required, and Rain was feeling particularly brutish this morning. Frustratingly, the ring remained stuck.

Hmm.

The new adamant fingertips of his gauntlets weren't getting in the way, at least. While they felt disproportionately heavy, they were small and unobtrusive, with the same blunt-tweezer shape as their predecessors. They were meant for picking quarters up off of tables, not carving cat-scratch furrows into someone's face. Tallheart had made them on a whim to help Rain climb, not having any better use for such a small quantity of the ultra-dense metal.

Rain reached over and grabbed another of the speckled fruits, popping it whole into his mouth. He munched mechanically as he continued fighting with the puzzle, happy to have a little time to kill.

Chemical Effect Activated

Kaikera Berry Toxin

10 Chemical Damage per Minute, 40-minute duration

Oops. Another one. He glanced over at the unknown fruit pile. *Was it the yellow ones, or was it the blue and brown ones from earlier? Doesn't matter, I guess. These taste better than most.* He chuckled to himself, then popped another of the yellow fruits into his mouth. *Resistances are awesome, and I've got Purify if it stacks too high.*

He returned his attention to the puzzle, the metal ring clinking as he continued to struggle with it.

Damn thing. What am I missing?

He heard Ameliah approaching but didn't look up, too focused on the ring. He reached blindly for the fruit pile, not even looking at what he grabbed. *I WILL solve this.*

"Okay, Bombur, that's enough," Ameliah said, her boots coming into view. "The moss will ignite in a few minutes. It's time to pack up."

Rain snorted, looking up at her. "Bombur? Ouch." He chuckled, then took a bite out of the fruit he'd grabbed at random. Immediately, he spat it out, then Purified the flavor away. *That's not a winner.* He shook his head, then smiled. "You're really getting into the story, aren't you?"

Ameliah laughed. "Yes, I am. It's amazing. Next chapter when?"

"I told you, it's not ready yet," Rain said, looking back down at the puzzle and resuming his attempts to solve it. "First, I need to remember it word-for-word, and then I need to translate it into common. That isn't easy, particularly if I want to get the nuance right, which I do, because anything less would be a disservice to Tolkien. You don't even know, Ameliah. I'm barely doing it justice."

"Uh-huh," Ameliah said, plucking the puzzle out of his hands. "So next chapter when?"

Rain sighed, watching her as she inspected the metal ring. "Maybe in a few days. I need to be fixing my soul, not digging through memories. I'm still stuck in the middle of the Bastion. It was really foggy in there when I checked this morning, and if I'm not wrong, it will probably start raining essence soon. Then I'll be swimming in it. The last thing I want is for the Bastion to fill up and then pop."

"That sounds like an excuse," Ameliah said, smiling. "Work faster. The integrity of your soul is of no consequence." She tossed him the ring, now free of the pair of horseshoes, and Rain fumbled it out of the air.

"How did you—? No, don't tell me. I want to solve it myself."

"Mmm, that is the way," Tallheart said, walking over to join them. He set down Rain's pack with a heavy thump. As if on cue, the moss blazed to life with the dawn. "It is time."

Rain nodded, accepting Ameliah's hand as she pulled him to his feet. He collected his helmet and shield, then set about donning his pack. They'd be traveling along the ground today, hauling all their supplies with them. They weren't coming back, not for a while. To make their passage easier, Tallheart had made a pair of oversized machetes, one of which he passed to Rain once he had finished tightening the straps of his pack.

"Here we go," Ameliah said once he was ready. "No risks. No chatter. We're doing this the right way this time."

"Mmm," Tallheart said.

Rain nodded in total agreement. This would be no casual treetop stroll like the day before. They would be traveling in single file with Tallheart in the lead, clearing the way with one of the machetes. Rain would follow behind him, monitoring for monsters and guiding them along the path of iron tokens. Ameliah would be in the back, carrying Tallheart's spare metal and guarding the rear. They'd been careful yesterday, true, but not nearly careful enough.

They'd spent hours going through all of the monster dossiers Rain had made, and they'd decided that Rain would deal with monster attacks whenever possible, with Tallheart stepping in when it was too much for him. Ameliah was their reserve, and as such, was not to use a single spell if she could help it.

Her Focus and Clarity synchronizations had been improving rapidly by virtue of all the mana Rain had been feeding her, but she couldn't just cast with impunity. The accolades she was using worsened the problem. They'd spent quite a lot of time debating whether it would be wise to retreat to the untyped zone for a week so she and Rain could focus on training. Ultimately, they'd decided against that. They didn't have infinite time, and there was another problem they needed to address: Ameliah's lack of equipment.

Getting through this jungle was only the first hurdle. There'd be another biome after this, and the difficulty was only going to increase. Ameliah would need powerful gear if they were to continue, but Tallheart couldn't make it without GranCrysts, adamant, and so forth. The plan had always been to search for materials as they went, but now, they had a more focused goal. Despite the danger they presented, the Hababas were also an opportunity.

Rain held up his hand, inspecting his adamant-tipped digits, then made a fist. *Time to farm.*

They set off into the jungle, Tallheart's machete making short work of the underbrush—when he bothered to use it. For the most part, he just plowed through like an icebreaker, only bothering to use the blade for the most troublesome of obstacles. Rain took up the slack, using his own machete to clear as wide a path for Ameliah as possible, particularly where there were thorns. She didn't have armor to stop her clothing from getting torn to shreds. The machete wasn't enchanted, merely stupid-big and wickedly sharp, but Rain's effective Strength at the moment was a staggering 57, thanks to the removal of the accolades. Swinging the oversized blade was no trouble. Its size made it unbalanced, but that was fine. It was for fighting plants, not anything that could hit back.

The going was slower than it had been in the treetops, but not by much. Rain was able to end most threats before they even got close, thanks to Detection's advanced warning. The jungle

suffered for it, but he had made his peace with the necessity. The main thing stopping him from just freezing a path through the brush completely was the amount of mana it would take. Another consideration was the mental effort required to prevent damage to their supplies.

Refrigerate naturally excluded the user's gear and the gear of other blacklisted entities. Unfortunately, the Double Gamgee was so large that it stretched the definition of 'equipment' beyond breaking. The level of concentration necessary to persuade the system otherwise was extremely taxing, requiring Rain to stop and devote his entire will to the task. He was getting better at it, but only slowly, and it worsened his headache without fail.

Ameliah was impressed, though. She insisted that even as much control as he'd already shown shouldn't have been possible for a bronzeplate. It was a constant struggle not to look too smug about that.

To avoid having an incident like the day before, Rain made sure to eat as they went. There was plenty of fruit to be had, unlike in the treetops, and when that wasn't enough, he had the Pan of Frying. His incessant hunger hadn't gone away, and Rain was starting to fear that he'd end up looking like a Hababa by the time it did. Ameliah had assured him that this wouldn't be the worst outcome, and if anything, she seemed a little excited by the prospect.

Rain wasn't quite sure how to process that. While Purify meant he didn't *need* to brush his teeth anymore, he liked having the option. He took solace in the fact that none of the adventurers he'd met had been that far gone. Carten was probably the beefiest, with the possible exception of Halgrave, though Rain had never seen the former branch-leader unarmored. Both doubtless had their Strength sync above ten, as did Tallheart and Ameliah, for that matter. Ameliah looked like a professional rock-climber, not She-Hulk, and Tallheart

was leaner than Carten, if anything. From this, Rain concluded that ten was likely the limit as far as physical appearance was concerned. Besides, Ameliah said she wasn't feeling any extra hunger from her own accolade-use. She would have been, had her soul been trying to alter her body.

In any event, it wasn't something Rain allowed himself to spend a lot of time worrying about. The jungle deserved his full attention. Monster attacks were frequent, and he soon lost himself in the endless cycle of Detection, Refrigerate, and Winter-fueled recovery. Flamewood Tortoises caused the only significant breaks from this pattern. For those, Tallheart had to get his hands dirty.

The antlered smith still refused to admit that he was a fighter, but his lack of offensive skills didn't hinder him in the slightest. By Rain's calculations, his equipment put him in roughly the same league as Ameliah, though it was a bit like comparing apples and orangutans. Tallheart was a BEAST when it came to stats. Taking Strength as an example, his effective total was above four *thousand*, including boosts from accolades, equipment, and a 2x multiplier from his class. Rain still wasn't sure how to calculate damage for non-system attacks, but at the end of the day, it didn't really matter. When Tallheart decided something needed a fist put through it, he didn't need anything as complicated as an attack skill to get the job done.

The first encounter with one of the Tortoises had been an experience, and no mistake. Tallheart had casually walked up to the car-sized monster, ignoring the stream of fire it was dousing him with. When he got close enough, it had tried to bite him in half, and he'd backhanded it contemptuously. The casual strike took about a quarter of its health, and it had immediately pulled back into its shell, falling to the ground with a heavy thump. This defensive measure had barely even slowed Tallheart down. It had only taken him three tries to smash a

fist through its bony shell, and with the third strike, he'd reached in, grabbed its spine, then ripped it out through the hole.

Needless to say, Purify had been required after that one.

The three following Tortoise encounters had been no less messy, though Tallheart did switch to using his hammer instead of his fists. His hammer didn't have a strike force enchantment, as something like that would have interfered with precise control when smithing. Instead, it had Lightness, Durability, Hardness, Kinetic Regeneration, and a few utility enchantments, such as a short-range homing beacon, which was both awesome and hilarious. The Lightness enchantment was counterintuitive at first. Tallheart said that while there were uses for a heavy hammer, he preferred not having to fight with his own tools. The hammer's head was mostly adamant and about the size of a closed fist, which was necessary to support all of the enchantments. Pure adamant—let alone adamant with a Weight enchantment—would have been ridiculously heavy. Even with Lightness, the hammer still weighed over four kilograms, and while that didn't sound like much, it really was. The Tortoises did not enjoy it, that was for sure.

Apart from the occasional mess, things proceeded generally apace. The Valbird didn't even make an appearance as they passed its tree. Before they knew it, they reached the area where Rain and Ameliah had encountered the Hababas, at which point, they discovered something unexpected.

When Ameliah had defeated the club-wielding Hababa yesterday, the wooden shafts of its weapons had perished along with their owner. The stone heads, however, had survived. Ameliah guessed that they were made of "stable" deepstone—deepstone that wouldn't lose its strength when removed from the depths. They'd stashed them right next to one of the iron

tokens, intending to come back and collect them later. Now, however, they were gone. Rain couldn't even sense them with Detection.

Items rarely spawned with monsters, but when they did, those items were as real as anything else. The clubs wouldn't have despawned. That meant something had retrieved them, and that was significant.

"Mmm, this is significant," Tallheart said, looking around at the trees.

Rain smiled, fighting off a sudden flashback to what was quite possibly the dumbest kung-fu movie ever made. Quickly, he pulled his thoughts back on track, turning to face Tallheart.

"What are you thinking?"

Tallheart blinked. "A normal monster might recognize a weapon and choose to keep it, but not a mere stone. It would perhaps use it as a tool, but then it would discard it. I believe the stones have been taken with purpose. They could again be made into weapons using only the materials available in this jungle. An aberrant could have realized this."

Ameliah nodded. "The colony must be close."

Rain considered this, then nodded as well, accepting it. The older a monster was, the more its behavior would diverge from the instincts with which it had spawned. Outside of lairs, it wasn't uncommon to find monsters imitating nature, banding together in 'colonies' or 'packs'.

'Aberrant' meant either a lone monster or a group that had reached the point of forming its own identity. Sometimes, in very rare cases, an aberrant would even be granted a unique name by the system. Some of the most lucrative Guild contracts involved dealing with such things, though monsters typically died long before reaching that status, killed either by

humans or other monsters. Once formed, however, aberrant packs were self-sustaining. They would grow over time if unchecked, adopting freshly-spawned monsters and indoctrinating them into their identity.

The implications were unsettling. The existence of a hyper-violent pack of roid-apes was horrifying enough without them having learned to make tools. It raised terrifying questions about just how intelligent a monster could be. A few months ago, Rain might have had qualms about killing such creatures, but no more. He didn't trust the opinion of just anyone, but he trusted Ameliah. If she said diplomacy wasn't an option, then it wasn't, end of story. The smarter a monster was, the more urgently it needed killing.

Monsters were monsters. They might *act* like they were alive—eating, sleeping, even playing and forming complex social structures—but they weren't. They didn't *need* to do these things, though it was complicated in the case of eating. Kin, for example, could sustain themselves in unranked areas, provided that they had enough food. It was one of the things that made them so dangerous. It wasn't about physical sustenance. It was about essence. In a ranked zone, monsters drew energy directly from their environment.

In any event, it struck Rain as perfectly reasonable for a colony of Hababas to have formed here, isolated in the depths. There was nothing in the Ashen Jungle that would be able to kill one, after all. Even if the pack had started with a lone aberrant individual, a colony could have developed over the course of years and years. Or centuries. Monsters didn't age.

There were other explanations for the missing stones, of course—some natural instinct, like a Crystal Slime's need to sort things, for example—but an aberrant Hababa colony was the most dangerous explanation. Thus, it was the scenario they would prepare themselves for.

Rain turned back to face his companions, checking the time as he did. "It's almost noon. I vote we set up camp here, then stash our stuff and use the rest of the day to search for the colony."

"Agreed," Tallheart said, blinking slowly.

Ameliah nodded in agreement, so Rain pulled the ripcord to jettison the Double Gamgee. It fell to the ground with a heavy thump, and he took the opportunity to stretch his shoulders. It would have been nice to reach the end of the jungle today, but stopping to set up camp had always been the plan. In wide-open areas like this, Tallheart said that you should never go past third bell without knowing where you were going to sleep. Now that they were treating the Ashen Jungle with the respect it deserved, they would stick to that rule.

"Stealth camp or strong camp?" Rain asked, removing a sasu from his pack. He bit into it, sour juice running down his chin. "Have you decided yet, Tallheart?"

"Strong camp," Tallheart said. He pointed to a grouping of three trees, forming a roughly equilateral triangle. "There."

Ameliah patted Rain on the back as she walked past him. "I'll have a quick look around up top. You two have fun. Don't worry. I won't go far."

Rain smiled at her, mouth too full to respond as she wriggled out of her boots, then bounded into the air.

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled, watching her go. He turned to Rain, having removed his own burdens as well. "Let us begin."

With that, they set to work. Rain cleared out the underbrush while Tallheart felled the three mighty trees, doing so carefully such that they landed in a triangle. Those formed the main walls of a three-sided fort, which Rain worked to shore up with branches and dirt until they had a respectable redoubt. With the trees gone, there was a gap in the foliage through which the glowing ceiling was visible. Ameliah returned from her scouting, never having left the range of Detection, and the three of them pruned back neighboring trees until the air was entirely clear above their stronghold. There was no point to walls if things could just drop down on you. They also cleared the surrounding area of brush in a wide radius, ensuring that whoever was on watch would be able to see any threats coming.

All in all, it took them around two hours, with only one interruption from a curious Deepcat. Rain smiled, standing next to Ameliah as he surveyed their handiwork. He was starving and exhausted, but also proud of what they'd built. His Dozer instincts were screaming at him that the angles weren't exactly perfect, but he was well-used to ignoring them at this point.

Who needs construction equipment when you have a Tallheart?

Ameliah laughed, seeing his expression. "I think we got a bit carried away."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "I used more stamina than I would have liked."

"Do you need me to refill you?" Ameliah asked.

Tallheart shook his head. "No. You would drain yourself in the attempt. Rain is but a shallow pool, while I am as the ocean."

"Hey," Rain protested, not really mad.

Ameliah laughed, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. He felt stamina flow into him, and he hugged her back in thanks.

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "I will be fine for today, but we must plan for the future. Eventually, I will need time to recover."

"I want the other seasons so bad," Rain said, motioning to Ameliah to stop. "I'm full, thanks."

"Mmm," Ameliah said, releasing him. She turned to Tallheart. "Come here. I'll give you a little, at least. My regeneration is decent enough with Mute, and we'll have time for me to get back to full. I could feel Rain's stomach growling through his armor while we were touching."

"No, you could not," Rain scoffed, heading for his pack. She was right, though. His stomach wasn't growling, but he *was* hungry. He'd set aside the Deepcat, intent on eating it, for all that he knew it would taste like soggy gym socks. Meat was meat. He couldn't afford to be picky.

He fought back a sigh, reaching for the Pan of Frying. "That's half an hour for lunch, everybody."

Rain watched from his vantage point, terrified and awed by what he was seeing. There were six Hababas on the ground about thirty meters from the base of the tree he was hiding in, cavorting around what had to be the fattest Fatbird he'd ever seen. It was lying on the dirt in a pool of its own blood, struggling futilely. Its immense weight wasn't what was preventing it from rising; rather, the problem was that its legs had been torn off. A seventh Hababa with a wooden crown was standing nearby, waving one of the Fatbird's severed limbs like a baton as it directed the others in their celebratory dance.

Playing backdrop to this scene was the Hababa colony proper. The trees ended abruptly, their splintered trunks telling of how they'd been cleared with brute force. Crude huts built from wood and bone surrounded a mountainous stone outcropping in the center of the clearing. That wasn't even the most defining feature of the area. That honor went to the river of literal *lava*. Rain could feel the heat of it even from this distance. The question of the missing slimes had been answered as well, as dozens of them were oozing around near the river's banks, appearing to be made of lava themselves. They were too far for the system to display their names, but he was sure that they were the Lava Slimes Ameliah had mentioned.

Not that they're important right now...

Rain clenched his teeth, watching as yet more Hababas rapidly filtered out of the colony, some of them emerging from the huts and others from a large cave in the side of the mountain. They loped toward the dancing ring, weapons clutched in their hands. Most had clubs, but three or four had blades seemingly identical to the one from the first group they'd encountered. Rain could feel sweat breaking out across his forehead as he counted.

Fifteen... Sixteen.... Shit. Just how many are there?!

As each new monster reached the Fatbird, it would throw down its weapons before joining the jamboree. The wooden-crowned Hababa thrashed its meat baton at them furiously, screaming up a storm, but it was mostly ignored for its trouble. There was nothing special about it, it seemed, as far as the system was concerned. It read as a level nineteen Hababa, exactly like all the others. The wooden crown looked like it had been made by hand.

A monster with delusions of grandeur?

"I believe we have found the colony," Tallheart said, keeping his voice down. It was barely audible over the chaos.

Ameliah swiftly raised her hand, forming the codesign for silence.

"They will not hear," Tallheart said, but closed his mouth and made a placating gesture when she glared at him.

Rain glanced at Ameliah anxiously, then back at the monsters, afraid to let them out of his sight. When the noise had started, they'd come quickly to investigate, but they hadn't expected to find...this.

We'll have to retreat. We can't fight that many, and it's only a matter of time before one of them looks up. We can come back once they're done doing...whatever they're planning on doing to that Fatbird. We can try to lure them out one at a time, or—

[Get ready,] Ameliah said in Rain's mind, pointing her palm at the dancing ring and bracing it with her other arm. *[I'm going to use Meteor.]*

Rain blinked.

Or that.

Ameliah started chanting, her voice audible by necessity. Rain clutched the straps of his shield tightly, the leather creaking from the strength of his grip.

"Wait," Tallheart said, laying a hand on Ameliah's shoulder. "Something else is coming."

Ameliah bit off her spell, then glanced at him. "Where?" she hissed.

Tallheart gestured with his chin. Rain squinted, searching until he made out a shadowy form within the cave. Slowly, an enormous figure walked out into the light, ignoring the two regular Hababas that had prostrated themselves in greeting.

Ameliah inhaled sharply, then spoke, no longer bothering to keep her voice down. "Okay, what the hells is that?"

Rain shook his head wordlessly, staring.

It was a Hababa, but not. It was tall and skeletal, its muscles more like those of a starving meth addict than a bodybuilder. Its face was animalistic but also regal, thanks in no small part to the ornate silver crown that rested across its brow. While it still had four arms, they were slimmer and disproportionately long, to the point that they were almost dragging on the ground despite its great height. The two regular Hababas stood as it passed, appearing short by comparison, then started following after it like attendants.

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled. "A king. This explains much."

Rain opened his mouth to say something—he wasn't sure what—but before he could, he was interrupted by a booming thud as all of the Hababa's below slammed both right fists to their chests in unison.

"Oooh!"

They had all turned, standing to face the newcomer. The booming crash came again as they slammed their chests once more, with both left fists this time.

"Oooh!"

Each of them then pumped all four arms in a salute, two fists straight up, and two out to the side, roaring as they did.

"AHH!"

The legless Fatbird wailed, but the Hababas ignored it, beginning to chant together in unison. They ran through the same sequence again, slamming their fists against their chests to the pattern, then performing the salute. With each repetition, they became faster and more synchronized.

"Oooh! Oooh! AHH!"

"Oooh! Oooh! AHH!"

“Oooh! Oooh! AHH!”

Rain pressed his hands to the side of his helmet, not that he expected it to help. The noise was overwhelming, though it wasn't an attack like yesterday. He could still feel the air vibrating, deep in his chest. The bizarre Hababa was close, now. Rain's jaw dropped as a name flickered into existence above its crown.

[Ahhahabam, Greater Hababa Shaman King – Level 24](#)

Rain's heart skipped a beat, then several more in quick succession. It was a blue, yes, and one with a name and everything, but that wasn't the most alarming thing.

Level twenty-FUCKING-four?!?! What the FUCK is that!?

His eyes flicked to the depth gauge, still safely strapped to the back of his shield. The needle remained stubbornly fixed on fifteen.

Is this thing broken, or what?

“Oooh! Oooh! AHH!”

“Oooh! Oooh! AHH!”

In the corner of his eye, Rain saw Ameliah shift her arm to point at the new threat. She had started her own chant again, but her voice was swallowed by the continuing noise. Quickly, Rain made sure Winter was active and that she wasn't blacklisted. As long as she was under its effects, he would get at least a token amount of contribution for the kill.

“Oooh! Oooh! AHH!”

“Oooh! Oooh! AHH!”

“Oooh! Oooh! AHH!”

“Oooh! Oooh! AHH!”

“Oooh! Oooh! AHH!”

“OORAHA!”

Acting as one, the Hababas all suddenly flung themselves down, pressing their foreheads to the ground in the presence of their monarch. The one with the wooden crown had only gone to its knees, and it was holding the Fatbird leg above its head like an offering, its gaze firmly directed downward.

Silence fell.

No, not quite silence.

The Fatbird shrieked.

Ameliah spoke the final syllable of her incantation.

She stood to her full height, then raised her arm above her head. She hauled at the air like she was trying to tear down the sky, her bicep standing out in definition as she pulled at something more than physical. Light flashed from above the canopy, blindingly bright even through the leaves. There was a roar like the rushing of a waterfall—displaced air, Rain realized, moments before a trio of stars slammed into the ground.

The world exploded.

Rain was blasted backward by the force but was jerked to a stop by a hand on his collar before he could tumble from the branch. He grabbed frantically at Tallheart's forearm, clinging on for dear life. His eyes were burning with the afterimage of the Triplicate-Meteor, and his ears were ringing, not only from the blast but also the torrent of kill notifications.

There was pain, yes, but no damage. His resistances had protected him. He managed to get his feet back under him, his heart hammering in his chest as shell-shocked silence fell over the jungle.

"Well, that was easy," Ameliah said, dusting off her hands.

Rain shook his head, pointing, having regained control of himself. In the blasted crater where the Hababas had been, the stone of the cavern floor was completely exposed. It was smooth, but for a suspicious hole, perfectly circular, and right where the Hababa king had been standing.

Quickly, he called up his interface, checking the kill notifications. The Hababa King's name wasn't there. He opened his mouth, shouting out a warning. "It's not—"

