

65: Ring

A shovelful of dirt flew through the air as Rain tossed it out of the trench he was standing in. He was in Tallheart's clearing, using the same shovel that the smith had made before they left for the lair. The bizarre alloy of metals hadn't suffered any ill-effects from being left out in the clearing the entire time that they had been gone. According to Tallheart, the upside of using Tel to bind the metal like that was that it made it incredibly easy to work while providing decent properties, depending on the metals used.

The downside was that it ruined the potential for future alteration. You only had about fifteen minutes after making the alloy before it 'set'. From that point on, that was it, you couldn't change it. Tallheart couldn't even use his crucible to separate the metals back out. Apparently, if the shovel was sufficiently damaged, it would shatter, vanishing completely. Melting counted as damage in that respect.

Rain's arms were burning. He didn't mind, though. The manual labor was nice after the long intellectual discussion with Staavo. Aside from that, Rain was itching to get Tallheart's house underway. He felt terrible that the cervidian had to stay out here in the cold. Jamus and Ameliah had elected to spend the night in the city. Ameliah said she wanted to keep an eye on the Lavarro situation, but Jamus had clearly been pining for his bed. Rain didn't hold it against him, but nevertheless, he had refused the man's offer to stay at his house, preferring to keep Tallheart company.

He kept digging despite the burning in his arms. He figured that Ameliah could restore his stamina again, as it had been a day since his last top-up. She'd said she would come out to the clearing around noon. Plus, Tallheart was almost done enchanting the ring that he'd made from the crown, so that would help quite a bit. *At least, once I get used to the boost. That could take a little while, depending on how large it ends up being.*

Another nice benefit of working on the foundation was that it gave him some time to think. He'd learned a lot over the course of the day yesterday, so much so that even his overmana wasn't enough for him to be confident that he would remember it all. He'd started using Winter Novas intermittently as he and Staavo talked. The bursts of cold were refreshing to his mind, helping him keep alert despite the deluge of information that he was being subjected to. He'd whitelisted Staavo as well, much to the man's surprise the first time he did it. The scholar hadn't been expecting Winter to be anywhere near as strong as it was. That, as well as further discussion of Rain's capabilities, had slowly started bringing the man around on the viability of Rain's skill choices.

How did he put it? Rain focused.

[Staavo grunted, rubbing at his eyes. "Ok, you aren't completely daft. It could work... I had no idea there were skills like that in the aura trees."]

Rain smiled as he continued to dig. Overmana was great. He'd decided not to charge his armor overnight, instead sleeping while channeling a Winter Nova. It had been uncomfortable, but he'd read an article that said the brain used sleep to record memories. He wasn't sure if that was true, but he wanted to give himself the best chance of retaining everything from the day before.

His progress on the trench was slow. He was digging shallowly, only down to a depth of half a meter. He wanted to dig out the entire area to that depth before trying to go any deeper. That alone was going to take a long time, so he was pacing himself. It was going to be a marathon, not a sprint.

Tallheart said he would come and help once he finished adding the enchantment to Rain's ring. He'd been working on it all day yesterday while Rain and Jamus were in the city. Rain was

eager for him to finish. The smith was adding in a whole bunch of flexibility at Rain's request, which apparently made the design quite complicated. Rather than being annoyed, Tallheart had seemed excited by the challenge.

Stat boosts counted as their own category when it came to soulstrain. The general rule of thumb was that you could only have ten times your level in stats from equipment. The only time Rain had come close to that was when he was trying on stat rings in the adventurer's shop near the guild. He'd had five rings on at one time, meaning a boost of 50 points. He'd been level seven then, and he hadn't felt anything.

The subject had come up a few days before in a discussion he'd been having with Val on the road. According to the light mage, soulstrain set in quickly once you got close to the limit. Staavo had confirmed it. You could push past it a little bit, but if you went too far, you'd be writhing in agony.

Where the depths is Val, anyway? Oh, I just said depths...huh, I'm thinking in common. When did I start doing that? Rain shook his head, stabbing his shovel into the earth. *He's probably trying to find someone to repair his jacket. He said it was his father's... Why does everyone I know have some sort of tragic backstory?* He tossed another shovelful of dirt over the side of the trench.

He doesn't even know if his father is still alive. He thinks the Empire abducted him because they found out about his power, but it happened when he was just a kid. I still don't know if I believe him when he says his father is goldplate-level. How do you even capture someone like that? I can't imagine a cell that could hold someone like Lavarro or Halgrave.

Rain stopped digging, sitting down on the edge of the trench to catch his breath. He looked over his progress. The hole was about a meter wide and three meters long with the dirt piled

up along one side. He had another seventeen meters to go before it was time to start widening it. That dimension was to be 12.36 meters, exactly. Once that was done, it would be time to do the whole thing again, deepening it by another half meter. And then again....and then again...and then again. *At this rate, I should be done sometime around...next year. Maybe I should have planned out a smaller house...*

Rain sighed and stretched his neck. *I wonder if I can get Tallheart enough metal to smith up a backhoe.* He raised his visor to take a drink from his canteen, then lowered it again. *One step at a time. Once my stats are boosted a bit, this should become much easier. I guess I'll go see if Tallheart has finished yet. I need a break anyway.*

Levering himself up out of the trench, Rain walked over to the other side of the hut where Tallheart was sitting cross-legged near his anvil. He had removed his gauntlets and was touching the ring with his thumbs and index fingers where it sat atop the anvil. His eyes were closed and he didn't appear to notice Rain's approach.

Rain quietly sat down nearby to wait. He knew better than to disturb Tallheart while he was working. At least, he thought the man was working. For all he knew, he'd fallen asleep like that. The antlered smith hadn't moved for the past few hours. *He'd said he would be finished 'soon', whatever that means. That was ages ago. Oh well. I've got plenty of stuff to think about.*

Rain turned his attention back to the conversation that he'd had with Staavo. Their discussion had meandered all over the place, making it a bit difficult to reconstruct it in a linear fashion. Nevertheless, Rain felt like he had been a blind man who'd suddenly learned to see. Many of the things that he'd only been guessing at were now clear.

For example, he now knew all about the politics of the Guild, the Watch, and the two major countries on this continent. He played back pieces of the previous day in his head, sorting and arranging them into a coherent picture of the world.

I might as well start with the Adventurer's Guild. I joined them before I even knew what they represented, but now that I know, I'm glad that I did. I mean, I had guesses, but those were just based on fantasy books and video games. I need to be careful about those kinds of assumptions.

In this case, though, I don't think I was that far off. The Guild is pretty much what you would expect. It's basically the go-to place if you have a problem and no one else can help.

Adventurers are this world's A-Team—I never actually got around to watching that show; both of my parents were always referencing it, but if it ever made its way to streaming, I never saw it. Oh well, I can still pity the fool.

Anyway, the Guild has its main branch in the City of Lights, the real name of which is Xiugaaraa. Everyone around here just calls it the City of Lights because the name is so hard to pronounce. Shee-you-gaa-raa. Not difficult, but English has more sounds than common does, so I have a little bit of an advantage. The language they speak there is called Zeelada and it's pretty much confined to that city and the surrounding area. Even Staavo didn't speak it. He's from Sadiir and they speak common just like most other places.

Anyway, back to the Guild. Halgrave is just in charge of the Fel Sadanis branch. The actual guild leader is a man called Burrik The Volcano. He's some sort of fire mage and he's a goldplate. There hasn't been a platinumplate in the guild for hundreds and hundreds of years. At least, I'm pretty sure the next metal they use for the plates is platinum. Staavo's description matched Tallheart's, but it could be some other ultra-rare heavy silver metal. Iridium or something. I tried explaining the periodic table to Tallheart before, but we never made it past the second row.

Rain glanced up to peek at Tallheart, then sighed. *Nope, still working. I can be patient. It will take however long it takes. Anyway, the Guild is a pretty big deal when it comes to world politics. They say they are neutral, but if anyone tries to restrict what adventurers can and can't do, they'll come down on them like a bag of bricks. The exceptions are cities like Fel Sadanis where the Watch is in charge. The guild needs to step lightly around here. Oh, and within the Empire of Adamant. There haven't been adventurers there for a while now, let alone a Guild branch.*

The Empire...sucks. I was picturing some sort of old-world empire with a leader and some nobles and things, but from Staavo's description, it's way worse than that. It's like some sort of fascist state with the potentate in absolute control. The people are all fiercely loyal; they're brainwashed, essentially. Anyone who speaks against the Empire gets tortured and killed.

It's gotten a lot worse since Fecht came to power. One of the first things he did when the old potentate died was to put that bounty on the cervidians. There was a resistance growing among the minority groups within the empire. Fecht crushed it. He's like Hitler if Hitler had superpowers and couldn't be killed.

He's been in power for over a hundred years now, and at this point, nobody dares to challenge him. The average person in the empire doesn't even think to. Staavo didn't use the term, but it is basically a cult of personality. They honestly believe that the potentate is practically a god or something and that all the other countries of the world are the enemy. That town Tallheart was describing...

Rain shook his head. *That is way too big of a problem for me to even think about right now. I know Val wanted to kill the potentate, but fuck, how would that even help? How do you fix an entire society that's been raised from birth to hate everyone outside their borders? You'd think the other countries would do something about it, but no. The Watch tried, but they failed, and*

none of the countries on the other continents care. I hope the DKE gets their shit together and does something about it. The Empire declared war on them, after all.

The DKE...well, there's another problem. They sound like a bunch of assholes too. This is why I need to be careful about assumptions. I was picturing some sort of elective monarchy or something. A fantasy kingdom with a noble king and queen elected by the populace. They would protect the people and rule with honor, yadda yadda yadda. That isn't it. Not at all.

"It is done," Tallheart rumbled.

Rain looked up, startled by Tallheart's sudden movement. His thoughts had been going down a dark path, but his mood quickly shifted as he saw the golden ring that Tallheart was holding out to him. He scrambled to his feet, rushing over. He reached out to take it but hesitated.

"Um...how am I supposed to wear a ring with these?" he said, spreading the fingers of his gauntlets.

Tallheart snorted. "You think I would have made you a ring you could not wear? I thought you would have noticed by now."

"Noticed what?"

Tallheart shook his head. "Look at the fingers of your gauntlets. What do you see?"

Rain looked down at his hands. His fingers were protected by thin plates of metal, hinged at each joint so they could bend. They connected at the knuckle with a socket joint, allowing free motion. He had noticed that the thin metal felt a bit flimsy when the enchantments were deactivated, but rigid and durable when they were working.

"What about them?" he said, flexing his fingers. "There's no way I'll be able to get the ring past the joints."

Tallheart sighed again. "Give me your hand."

Rain reached out to him with his left hand. Tallheart took it and grasped his middle finger, bending it out straight. He pushed in, twisted, then pulled. The metal slid off easily, revealing Rain's finger below. Tallheart slid the ring on to the metal finger he'd removed, then offered it back to Rain. "Slide it back on, then twist until it locks."

Rain blinked, surprised. The larger pieces of the armor connected like that, but he hadn't known that Tallheart had used the same kind of joint on the fingers as well. He followed the instructions, sliding the finger back on and locking it in place. The golden ring was fit snugly in place between the knuckle and the first joint of his middle finger. *Now I've got some major Sauron vibes going on*, he thought, clenching his fist. *One ring to rule them all!*

"Tallheart, you're a genius! How did you even make these gauntlets this flexible?" Rain said, bending his fingers. He could feel the ring's presence, but it didn't hinder his movements. He'd have problems if he wanted to deck himself out with a full set of ten of the things, but as it was, he would have no issue.

Tallheart hummed happily. "Try the ring. It must be bonded, first. Be careful that you do not injure yourself."

Rain grinned, holding his hand up to inspect the ring. The surface was smooth, no runes or script apparent, just pure, unblemished gold. Without further ado, he opened up his inventory and sent his mana rushing through the ring to bind it.

Malleable Ring [Bound]

- Durability: 102/102
- Material: Grand Arcane Gold
- Mana Capacitance Rune
 - 0/226 mp
 - Import Efficiency: 75%
 - Export Efficiency: 0%
- Stat Enhancement Rune Complex [Inactive]
 - Maximum Allocation: 287 points
 - Cost: 1 mp/point/day
- Subordinate Metallic Unity Rune [Active]

Rain's jaw dropped as he read through the enchantments listed on the ring. The flexible stat boost was what he'd asked for, but the strength of it was beyond his wildest expectations.

How did he make it so strong? Grand Arcane Gold? What the hell is that? Subordinate Metallic Unity? Huh?

Rain pushed mana into the ring, easily bringing the capacitor up to full. He focused on the enchantment. There were six fuzzy runes that felt like inputs within the complex enchantment. His sense was fuzzy, Mana Manipulation not giving him a clear picture of what was going on within the metal. *Those must be the controls. There's six of them because there are six stats to choose from.* Tentatively, he pressed on one of them with his mind, willing it to activate.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" Rain screamed as his world was consumed by fire. His bones felt like they were burning from the inside as if the marrow had been replaced with lava. The pain vanished after a few seconds of absolute agony. Rain collapsed, but his fall was arrested by Tallheart.

"Why did you do that? Did I not warn you?" Tallheart said, lowering him to the ground. Rain tasted blood. He'd bitten his lip when Tallheart had caught him. He looked down at his hand, noticing that the ring had been removed, along with the finger of his gauntlet. He looked back at Tallheart, panting.

"What the fuck was that?! It felt like—"

"That was soulstrain. I told you to be careful."

"I was being careful!" Rain protested. "I barely touched it!"

"Clearly not," Tallheart said. He propped Rain up and offered him the ring again, still on the metal finger of the gauntlet. "Try again. This time, do not try to activate the full enchantment at once."

Rain hesitantly took the finger but didn't slip it back on. He glared at Tallheart. "We need to talk about what constitutes a proper warning." He spat, trying to clear the blood from his mouth. "Would it have killed you to explain how to activate it safely?"

Tallheart shook his head. "I am sorry. It is not something that can be explained. The process of mentally controlling an enchantment is different for everyone."

Damn it that fucking hurt. Rain sighed and slipped the finger back on to the gauntlet, trying to stop his hands from shaking. Carefully, oh so carefully he extended his senses again, feeling for the runes within the metal. His sense was vague, Mana Manipulation not having the resolution to see what was going on.

Fuck this. Okay, system, I want a control panel for this thing. Enough with just going by feel. Come on. He focused. Almost immediately, a blue panel popped up in front of him. He blinked in surprise. He'd been expecting to have to fight tooth and nail to get the system to give him a dialog for the ring. Contrary to his expectations, it had appeared with barely any effort. *Why?* Rain looked over the dialog. There were six sliders like on a soundboard for mixing audio, each labeled with the name of a stat and with markings going from zero to 100%. There was a small number zero displayed in a box above each slider, just below the label. *If I can make something like this, why can't I make a damn calculator?*

Carefully, he slid the slider marked 'Recovery' up. The number displayed below the label climbed and he stopped when it got to 50. He didn't feel a thing. He pulled open his menus to make sure that the ring was working.

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 18

Experience: 9128/22750

Dynamo

Health	200
Stamina	200
Mana	5100

Strength	10
Recovery	60[10]
Endurance	10
Vigor	10
Focus	10
Clarity	200

Free Points	0
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Statistics

	Total	Base	Modifier
Health	200	200	0 100%
H.Regen	600/day	600/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	1.67/s	0.21/s	-0.05/s 820.0%

Movement Speed	10
Perception	20

Resistances

Heat	Cold	Light	Dark
1 0%	1 0%	1 0%	51 0%
Force	Arcane	Mental	Chemical
1 0%	1 0%	1 0%	1 0%

Holy shit, it's working! This is great! My lip should heal at like six times normal speed. As far as the system is concerned, the stat boost applies immediately. Jamus said that the soul needs to get used to the stats, but I don't think that's really it. It's the body that needs time to adapt, not the soul. Until you're used to it, you can't get the full benefit of the boost.

For Strength, it's easy to see the effect; it just means how strong you are. For Recovery, it's how much health you can regenerate before you start feeling sick and weak. I shouldn't leave it like

this for long unless I want more pain. I guess spreading things out would be the best way for now.

Rain played with the sliders, careful not to exceed a total boost of 180 points. He could feel the heat in his bones starting to return as he passed 150, a warning that he was approaching his limit. He'd have to get used to stat boosts in general, as well as the stats themselves. He decided to err on the side of caution and boost each stat by 20, rather than trying to push it any further. He closed the window and reviewed his modified status.

Attributes	
Richmond Rain Stroudwater	
Level 18	
Experience: 9128/22750	
Dynamo	
Health	600
Stamina	600
Mana	6750
Strength	30[10]
Recovery	30[10]
Endurance	30[10]
Vigor	30[10]
Focus	30[10]
Clarity	220[200]
Free Points	0

Statistics

	Total	Base	Modifier
Health	600	600	0 100%
H.Regen	300/day	300/day	0/day 100%
Stamina	600	600	0 100%
S.Regen	300/day	300/day	0/day 100%
Mana	6750	6750	0 100%
M.Regen	1.87/s	0.234/s	-0.05/s 820.0%

Movement Speed	10
Perception	20

Resistances

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

He laughed and flipped up his visor to beam at Tallheart. "Tallheart, this is disgusting!"

Tallheart frowned. "What is disgusting? Is there something wrong?"

Rain laughed again and shook his head. "No, the ring is amazing. It just feels...dirty. It's too strong." He flicked on his HUD to check his stamina and health. The menus didn't display the

current values for his vitals, just the total. As he expected, the bars on his HUD weren't full. He'd have to regenerate the points.

"I am glad you like it," Tallheart said. "It is the most intricate piece of enchantment I have ever done on an item that small. It was only barely within my skill."

"How did you even do this, Tallheart?" Rain said, staring at his statistics in wonder. "This changes everything!"

Tallheart smiled. "It was not easy. I needed to add a GranCryst to the metal for it to support the required runic density."

Rain blinked. "A...GranCryst? Those are like normal Crysts, but super rare, right? Oh, that explains it. Grand Arcane Gold..." Rain paled as he looked down at the ring adorning his finger. "Tallheart, no, you can't just do something like that. Now I owe you like...shit, a few thousand Tel? Where did you even get one of those? Here, take it back. I can't accept this."

Tallheart laughed, surprising Rain as he fumbled with the gauntlet, trying to remove the ring. "No," the antlered man said. "You will accept it. I have had that Cryst for many years. It has little value for me. This is the type of thing that it is meant for. I am...happy that I was able to use it at last."

"Tallheart, no. It's too much. I need to pay you back."

Tallheart shook his head. "You already have."

"Huh?" Rain said.

"You do not understand. It is not about Tel."

"What do you mean?"

Tallheart pointed to the trench. "Jamus would not do that. He is a friend, yes, but he is sleeping in his house in the city, not camping in the forest with me. You have been working on that all morning. That you would do so...it means...much. That is not all. The metal. The supplies. The coffee. Even your questions. It is nice...to be with people again."

"Tallheart, I..."

"Thank you, Rain," the smith said, nodding to him. He turned his back and walked off in the direction of the trench. "Come. There is work to do."