

59: King

"Thanks, Gus," Rain said, slipping the Tel into the pouch he'd borrowed from Jamus. *Up to 16.*

"You're a freak, you know that?"

Rain grinned. "Pleasure doing business with you." The room was comfortably warm, the heater plates glowing merrily on the wall. A few people were starting to trickle in from outside now, taking advantage of the warmth. Third bell had just struck, which Rain translated to 3PM. Hours were mercifully the same length on this Earth as they were on his own. Weeks were twelve days instead of seven, though. That was weird. It didn't matter that much in the end, however. Adventurers didn't really get weekends.

Right, time to deal with this slime. Still no sign of Val. I'll see if someone else around here is willing to come with me. I know just who to ask.

Rain walked off in the direction of the training room. He'd seen the scarred man, Jaks, in there earlier when he'd gone in to charge the heater plate. He'd been whaling on one of the training dummies with a pair of crude-looking axes. *If he was just training today, he might be up for joining in on a quick quest. Plus, I want to figure out if he really has a monolithic class like I do. I don't think I need anyone to come with me, but I do want to meet some more people at the guild.*

Rain paused as he approached the training room. His nose twitched as he breathed in. *Is that...blood?* He looked into the room. Jaks was lying on the floor in a crimson puddle, his body covered by lacerations. The cuts were evenly spaced as if they'd been inflicted by some methodical torturer.

"Shit!" Rain swore. *I need to get help.*

"Quiet," came a voice from the puddle of blood. "I'm fine. I swear, if another one of you fucks goes to get that asshole Wallace, I'll lose it."

Rain stared at Jaks as he lifted his head to look at him. "Uhh...."

"What are you fuckin staring at?"

"I'm staring at you," Rain said. "What happened?"

"Fuck off," Jaks said, lying back in his puddle of blood. "I'm out of mana, and I don't have the patience for this shit."

"Um, you sure you're okay? I could give you some mana if you want."

"I ain't paying."

"I wasn't asking you to. Hang on." Rain quickly whitelisted the man and sent some mana over to him with Essence Well. Jaks' eyes widened as the skill took effect. Rain kept it going as Jaks sat up, watching him.

After a little while, the bloody man raised his hand. "Gah, stop!"

Rain stopped. "Too much?"

"Yeah. Fucking mages and their fucking bottomless mana pools."

All of a sudden, a strange feeling came over Rain. *Huh. What's that? It feels like...a warmth. The sun on the grass. I know what this is. He's using Summer!*

Rain pulled open his status to check. *Yup. There it is. A 100% boost to health regeneration. He must not be able to maintain it. The cost would only be 10 mana an hour, but if he's just got base regen... It must have taken him years to get it to rank 10. I wonder how long he's been an adventurer?*

Rain was still watching Jaks curiously. The cuts were starting to scab over before his eyes. Jaks got to his feet and ran his bloody hands over his bald head. "Thanks. Now, stop fucking staring."

Rain glanced away. *Well, that settles it. He's definitely a Vivificant. Also, he's insane and an asshole. He must have done that to himself for some kind of training. That's...hardcore. I mean, it makes sense that you'd need to get hurt to train health regen skills, but damn. Does he even feel pain?*

Rain looked back at the man. He'd collected his axes and was surveying one of the dummies. He was still a bloody mess. Rain stopped himself from using Purify. The man might need the blood for something. There was a blood magic tree, after all. The skills in tiers 0 and 1 were more about controlling your own blood to boost your body in various ways. He hadn't seen anything to control blood once it had left the body, but there could be something in the higher tiers that he hadn't unlocked yet. He'd dismissed the tree because all of the skills had costs listed in hp instead of mp. For a Vivificant, however, it would make a lot of sense.

Do I really want to go off alone with someone like this? Might as well ask... Maybe he was just grumpy because he was low on mana. Here goes.

"Hey, you're Jaks, right? I'm Rain."

"Fuck off."

Okay then. The grumpiness wasn't because he was mana starved. "I've got a quest that I wanted to do, and I was wondering if—"

"Did I fucking stutter?" said Jaks, glaring at him.

"Wow, okay, sorry. I'll leave you alone." So much for that plan. Dude's got issues. I guess I'm on my own unless I want to go try the tavern. I think I'll go do that.

Unfortunately, nobody in the tavern was willing to join him on the quest once he'd explained what it entailed. His guess about the quality of the reward was spot on. *Whoever posted this quest would have been waiting a long time if I hadn't come along. Val would have only taken it because he thought it might have been a blue. Where is Val, anyway? Ah, screw it. I can deal with an overgrown slime on my own. It's not like they're fast or anything. What's the worst that could happen?*

Rain set off from the guild, waving to Gus as he left. The portly man waved back. He'd started being much friendlier to Rain after he'd finished with the heater plates, though whether that was from gratitude or something else, Rain wasn't sure. *My mana regeneration really is kinda stupid. I might want to keep a lid on it if I don't want a bunch of attention.* He switched the IFF settings on Winter as he left the guild, shutting it down for everyone but him and his allies. As innocuous as the skill was, he intended on complying fully with Halgrave's policy on magic use when he was out and about in the city.

It was snowing pretty heavily, and Rain was keenly aware of his lack of a cloak as he hurried along. Hopefully it would be warmer underground. Despite the weather, there were a lot of people on the streets. The city was packed. From the conversations he'd overheard earlier, it had something to do with the war between the Empire and the DKE. People were coming in from the towns and villages closer to the DKE border, not wanting to get caught up in the conflict. *I need to find a damn map. I don't even know how far that is from here.*

Rain reached the entrance to the sewers and headed down the stairs. He turned when he reached the bottom and started walking along the waterway, his metal boots clicking against the stone. The darkness wasn't bothering him in the slightest, not since he'd gotten the perception accolade. The smell was another story, but Purify took care of that easily enough. The light of the aura would have been more than sufficient for his enhanced eyes even if the torches in the tunnel hadn't been lit.

He didn't encounter any slimes as he walked through the tunnels, which struck him as odd. All the torches were burning brightly. Depending on when they had last been changed, it might have been that there hadn't been any darkness deep enough for the monsters to spawn. That or some other adventurer had cleared them out earlier in the day.

He reached the passage that he remembered leading to the chamber where Val had been fighting the slime. He shrugged out of his pack and set it down on the ground. He wanted to be able to move quickly if he needed to. It would be safe enough here. There wasn't much of value in there anyway.

He slowly moved up the tunnel, relying on the light of Purify to see as there were no torches in this direction. As he approached the barrier, he reduced the aura to the barest trickle. The dim white light flared slightly as it touched the disgusting plug blocking the tunnel. *Damn it, I should have brought a torch from the intersection. I don't particularly want to try swimming in*

this armor. The canal isn't that deep, but the wall of water waiting on the other side of this crap is a different story.

Rain surveyed the barrier blocking the tunnel. A sticky substance was holding together a mass of leaves, sticks, and other debris, just as he remembered. Unlike the last time, the passage was fully sealed, not even a trickle of water making it into the channel. He retreated, not wanting to stand near the blockage much longer lest Purify start breaking through it. He needed at least some light to see, so he couldn't drop it completely.

He stopped once he was out of range, sitting down against the wall to rest. His legs were quite tired after walking all morning. He'd been wearing the armor constantly since Tallheart had made it for him. Though it was less cumbersome than he'd originally expected armor to be, it was still taking a toll. *Purify is great. I'd be so grody in here if not for that. Oh, hey. I've been wearing the same pair of underwear for like a month. That's a fun thought.*

Right, first things first. What's waiting for me on the other side of the nasty wall? Rain closed his eyes and activated Detection, scanning for entities. He boosted the range to the full 108 meters, but limited the power, not wanting to overwhelm himself. He felt a bunch of signals coming from far above him, perhaps 20 or 30 meters. There was a lone signal coming from the other side of the barrier, and nothing below him, to the sides, or back the way he had come.

Humm. I can't tell what's what at this level of power. The signals from above are probably people, and the one ahead is probably the slime, but they feel more or less the same. What if I boost the power? He slowly increased the power he was feeding to the skill, stopping quickly as he started to feel pressure building behind his eyes. The motion of the signals was getting harder and harder to deal with the more he boosted the skill, the signals becoming more and more defined.

Well, that works I suppose. I can tell the people are people and the slime is a slime, but not much more than that. Wow, there's a lot of them up there. I wonder, if I push it further, can I actually start to tell what they look like? Right now, it's just a sense of...humanness? It's not like I'm seeing, it's more like I just know that they are there. This skill is a bit creepy. I'm literally spying on people from under the damn ground and they have no idea.

He changed the focus on Detection, asking the skill to detect only humans. The signal from the slime disappeared. He changed it again, this time only looking for monsters. The slime reappeared, and all the humans vanished. *Wait a minute...there's still something up there. A monster. In with all the humans. That's...alarming. It must be an adventurer's pet. Someone who took those monster subjugation skills I saw. Hopefully. The alternative is that it's something that can blend in with humans without them noticing. Are doppelgangers a thing?* Rain canceled the skill as the strange signal moved out of range. *Nothing I can do about it right now.* He turned his thoughts back to the slime.

Battleplan time. I can't see a level 7 slime being worse than a pack of Kin, but I'm going to take it seriously. First problem, there's going to be a ton of water on the other side of this wall. He let off a pulse of weak Detection. Yup. Ton of water. I've got to deal with that first. I guess draining it is the easiest way. Freezing it seems like it would be a bad idea. Water expands when it freezes. I don't want to break the sewer. Plus, I'm not sure if I could freeze that much water anyway, at least not without freezing myself.

How am I gonna deal with this? Humm. Well, if I use all my mods, I can get Purify up to 108 meters in radius. I could go way down the tunnel and try to break through from there. I could probably make it back to the main channel before the water caught up to me. Even if it did and I got swept into the channel, it isn't deep enough that I'd drown. Worth a shot.

Humm. Will I get in trouble if a bunch of toilets in the city suddenly erupt with magic smoke? It's harmless magic, and it's in service of a quest, so I'd technically be okay. Still...

Rain set Detection to look for air, starting at low power and boosting it slowly. He gave it up when he started tasting colors. He couldn't get the resolution he needed to check for open paths to the surface without overloading his brain. *The hard way it is.*

He got to his feet and reactivated Purify. He boosted it slightly from the level he'd been using before but didn't extend it. He only wanted it for the light at the moment. He walked all the way back to the waterway, scanning the ceiling for any gaps or pipes that would let his aura escape from the tunnel. He didn't see anything, so he turned around and started making his way back toward the barrier.

Ok, I should be good. I guess if people have to bring their shit down here in buckets, toilets like the one in the guild can't be common. Thus there aren't many dedicated pipes leading down here. Also, I should be able to use Immolate and Refrigerate without breaking anything, as long as I don't push too hard. There aren't any pipes to burst, and I'm deep enough to not worry about the people. I must be under a hill or something.

He dropped Purify and walked back along the tunnel in complete darkness, running his hand along the wall. He used Detection to search for the barrier. The range of all his auras was identical, so he knew exactly how far away he needed to be. He sat against the wall once he felt it appear. He dropped Detection, switching to Winter to make sure he had plenty of mana. *I want to be full for this.* He sat against the wall to wait.

When he was ready, he got back to his feet. He took a running stance, then used a Purification Nova at full blast. Quickly, he switched to Velocity and chased the glowing wave of light down the tunnel. He almost caught up to it before he stumbled and had to reduce the speed boost.

He managed to avoid falling over and kept running. The light in front of him escaped the tunnel and burst out into the torch-lit intersection. He rounded the corner and pressed himself against the wall, waiting.

Over the sound of his own heartbeat, he heard a rushing sound echoing down the tunnel. It quickly grew to a roar as a torrent of water gushed out of the tunnel, carrying the remains of the barrier with it. Purify hadn't been able to dissolve it entirely, but it had weakened it enough for it to succumb to the pressure of the water. Rain gagged. The smell was awful. He activated Purify again to protect his sensitive nose from the onslaught. *I sure hope this perception thing doesn't end up being a curse.*

The water slowed to a trickle after a few minutes. Rain cautiously stepped around the corner and moved back up the tunnel. He kept Purify going, destroying the remaining filth as he walked, leaving only clean, wet stone. He stopped as he reached the head of the tunnel. The barrier was back, but it was different. This time, it was almost entirely slime, very little debris. *The big slime must have blocked it again. It must have some slime generation skill or something. Well, I could dissolve it right here and now, but...* He switched to Detection. *Yup, there's still water on the other side. The level's come down, though. Back down the tunnel I go.*

Rain had to repeat his trick three more times before he was satisfied that the chamber on the other side of the barrier had been drained. The last time, only the barest trickle of water had come down the tunnel after his Purification Nova. He was dead tired from sprinting down the tunnel in his armor, so he walked back up slowly, bringing a torch he'd stolen from the wall with him this time. *I need to practice with Velocity more. Moving in the armor while I'm boosted is pretty tough.*

He saw that the barrier had been rebuilt once more as he reached the end of the tunnel. Low on mana again, he stopped to regenerate. He forced himself to ignore the smell coming from

the barrier, waiting as Winter did its work. *This really reeks. I seem to be able to tolerate it, though. Come to think of it, light doesn't seem to bother me, even though I can see a lot better in the dark now. Maybe it isn't as simple as just turning up the gain on everything. More research is needed. Later, though. I've been down here long enough.*

He activated his overlay, restoring his health, mana, and stamina bars. He'd taken to leaving them off most of the time, but since he was going to be in combat, he wanted them there. Below his health was a new bar showing him the durability of his armor in gray. It was still mostly empty of course. Rain had convinced the system to add it yesterday, so its presence wasn't a surprise. The bar would also show him the armor's mana saturation, filling with a transparent bluish highlight as the metal absorbed magical attacks.

Finally ready, he dropped Winter and switched back to Purify. *Here we go.* He let the aura work on the barrier, not rushing it. The slime slowly dissolved under the onslaught of the white light. Rain stepped back as the barrier lost cohesion, not wanting to get any of it on his armor. He could just clean it away, of course, but for all he knew, the stuff would etch the metal.

He raised the torch. By its light, he could see that the room behind the barrier was fairly large. The floor was damp, but there was no obvious source for the water that had previously filled it. There were several other plugs of slime blocking off archways leading in other directions. There was no sign of the monster. Rain shrugged. *I bet it's on the ceiling. I'm not falling for that again.*

He wound up and tossed the torch into the center of the room where it fell to the stones with a clatter and a hiss. The orange flames lit the room but didn't reach quite to the ceiling. Still, nothing happened. *Ok, slime. Hiding time is over.* He switched to Detection and scanned the room at a low intensity. The slime was lurking on the ceiling directly over his tunnel, waiting to

drop on him the moment he set foot into the room. He estimated its distance at around 15 meters above him. There were no other entities within 18 meters. *You're in for a surprise, Mr. Slime. Auras go around corners. I'm not even going to have to leave the tunnel.*

Rain switched to Immolate. The skill was on whitelist mode, with only "monsters" listed on the display. The slime was classified as a monster, as confirmed by Detection, so he was good to go. "Let's get cooking." He grinned, activating the skill at 25% power. *Good thing there was nobody around to hear that line.* He pulled open the description for the skill as the wave of heat blasted out from the entrance to the tunnel, expanding to fill the room.

Immolate (10/10)

33-38 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 12.5 mp/s

There was a softer-than-expected noise as the slime detached from the wall above the tunnel. Counter to Rain's expectations, it didn't fall straight down. It launched itself out into the chamber, probably to get away from the sudden and unexpected heat. Rain kept the skill up as the slime flew away. He'd need to drop it eventually, but that was more out of a concern of parboiling himself in his armor than it was from running out of mana.

The slime landed near the torch with the sound of a billion blown noses. Rain finally got a good look at it. It was the same shade of greenish-brown as the other sewer slimes, but much, much larger. It was easily the size of a house. The light of the torch glinted off of a tiny metal crown perched atop its body. Rain's interface showed him the slime's name, level, and health, the last appearing as a red bar.

Level 7 Mucus King? Really? Who names these things? And why does it have a crown?

The slime gathered itself up, then started pulsating angrily. It didn't seem to want to come any closer, staying at the edge of the Immolation aura. Rain had a choice. He could either extend the aura and risk collateral damage or move out into the chamber. *Fuck me, I'm going in. 18 meters is bad enough. I can't risk extending it any further. I don't want to send fire shooting out of all the storm drains in the city.* He gritted his teeth. *Here I go.*

He started walking toward the Mucus King, his footsteps loud on the rapidly drying stone floor. The slime squelched its way backward but quickly ran out of room. Rain's aura covered the entire chamber, filling it with the foul odor of cooking sewage. He gagged as he breathed in the putrid steam that was starting to rise from the floor but didn't drop the aura.

The slime quivered in outrage as it reached the wall, the tiny crown wobbling atop its gelatinous mass. Rain watched the slime's health bar carefully. *It's starting to drop, but it's getting pretty hot in here. Should I switch to Refrigerate? No, I don't want to put out the torch. Plus, those slimes in the forest were flammable. I wonder if this one—oh. There it goes.*

The Mucus King burst into flame, its surface lighting up all at once and throwing off clouds of putrid, greenish smoke as the greasy flames spread. Rain's eyes widened as the flaming ball of snot launched itself at him, flying through the air with terrifying speed. He threw himself to the side, desperately trying to get out from under the disgusting fireball. The slime landed with a horrible splatter that sent flaming droplets of filth flying in all directions. Rain felt a few of the blobs splatter on the back of his armor as he ran. *Oh fuck! Should have switched to Refrigerate after all!*

He glanced over his shoulder. The flaming slime was in right behind him, squelching along the floor as it chased him around the chamber. *Shit. I think I can outrun it for a while, but its health*

bar isn't dropping any faster, despite being on fire. How much does health does this fucking thing have?

Rain glanced at his mana bar. He'd been holding Immolate for at least a minute now. His mana was down by about a fifth, but the slime had lost less health than that. *Bullshit that's a normal amount of health for a level 7 monster. It must have damage reduction or something. Let's see how you like 50% power!*

Immolate (10/10)

66-76 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes ignition

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 25 mp/s

The display hovering to his right updated as Rain kept running. His armor was glowing with a reddish light as the heat rolled off him, the mana interacting with the metal. He coughed as the smoke filling the room grew thicker, the air growing heavy and unbearably hot. His lungs were burning as he dove for the tunnel, having made a full circuit of the room. He dropped Immolate as he reached it, switching to Purify to clear the air. He kept running as the slime slammed itself into the mouth of the tunnel, squeezing itself in after him.

Rain glanced back at it. Its health was down to about half now, and it was still on fire. The cloying smoke fought with the light of Purify as the slime oozed down the tunnel toward him. Rain glanced at his own mana. It was also at about half, the increased damage of the skill had clearly been more effective in overcoming the slime's defense. He checked his own health. It was down a few points, confirmed by the fact his lungs were burning and his armor felt like an oven wrapped around him.

Okay, fuck this. Switching to Refrigerate. Let's see how you deal with cold. 100% power!

Refrigerate (10/10)

132-151 cold (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes slow

Range: 18 meters

Cost: 50 mp/s

The floating skill card switched immediately to Refrigerate, the system automatically responding to Rain's desire. The whitish light of Purify was blasted away by the sudden wave of cold. His armor shone with a furious blue light as he slowed to a stop, daring the slime to get closer. The flames guttered and died as the temperature in the hallway plummeted. The greasy smoke froze and started falling to the ground like snow. Ice began to form across the surface of the slime as it ground to a halt, stuck in the tunnel. He watched its health drop rapidly, keeping an eye on his own mana. The slime's health was falling faster. *Got you.*

The slime died, frozen solid. The system announced its death with the familiar chime of a kill notification. Rain collapsed to his knees in relief. He only had a few hundred mana left and he was starting to lose feeling in his extremities. The cold in the tunnel was bitter, far, far worse than the coldest winter. He quickly used the last of his mana on Immolate, bringing the temperature in the tunnel back up to bearable, if arctic, levels.

What the fuck was that? No way that thing was only level 7. Something is seriously wrong here. The Kin weren't nearly that tough, and they were the same damn level. Holy shitballs it's cold!

Rain was shivering violently as he drew himself up to sit against the wall of the tunnel. He glanced at his health. He'd lost some more, bringing him down to about 190 remaining. His

skin and lungs felt raw, burned first by the heat and steam, then by the acrid smoke, and lastly by the bitter cold. *Damn it. I didn't need to push it that hard. If I'd taken my time, I wouldn't have hurt myself so much. I could have retreated to regenerate instead of trying to do it all at once. There's no way it could regenerate health faster than I can regenerate mana.*

Cold as he was, he activated Winter with Aura Focus. He needed mana and he needed it now. The feeling of the chill deepened, but he knew it was just in his head. He canceled the skill after a few seconds, using Immolate to further warm the air. He repeated this a few times until the temperature in the tunnel was bearable and the slimesicle next to him was starting to melt. The smell was atrocious, but he didn't even care anymore. After breathing the horrible smoke, this was practically pleasant.

I need some better resistances if I'm going to do something like this again. The armor does jack shit against the blowback. It's not mana, it's just the temperature of the air. That tears it. I'm taking the darkness aura next. Too much dark never hurt anyone. Fuck, my lungs.

Rain coughed, then clamped his teeth together. He focused on his breathing, trying to keep it calm and steady, using Purify periodically to clear the air as the slime melted. He felt better after a while; his lungs were inflamed, but no longer screaming at him. The remains of the frozen Mucus King eventually succumbed to Purify, leaving behind 6 Tel, the crown, and a shiny greenish gem that Rain assumed was some type of Cryst. The crown brightened Rain's spirits considerably. It was very heavy and looked like it was made of gold. Unfortunately, it wasn't any bigger than a normal human-sized crown, despite the fact that the Mucus King had been the size of a house.

His excitement was dampened considerably when he used Detection to search for gold. The crown only gave off a faint reading. It was far from pure. Further checking revealed that it had

a much stronger response for Lead. *Damn it, it's only plated, not solid. Still, it's probably worth something. I'll see if Tallheart can separate it out. A golden strength ring would be wonderful.*

Rain painfully got to his feet and sighed. *Crap. I have to walk back now, don't I?* Before he left, he checked the room that the slime had been living in for further treasures. It was filled with sludge, but not much else. He cleared it all away with Purify, figuring that the room served some purpose. Leaving the other passages blocked was probably a bad idea. Even if there was no water flowing into the chamber now, that didn't mean it was always like that.

He trudged down the tunnel to retrieve his pack, tucking the crown inside. He replaced the torch on the wall from where he had stolen it. It had somehow managed to stay lit through all of the excitement. Whatever magic kept the evertorches burning, it seemed to be pretty reliable.

The walk back was excruciating. His muscles were badly strained by all the running that he'd been doing. By the time he made it out of the sewer, it was dark and the snow was still falling heavily. Rain's skin felt raw within his armor as he trudged through the city, heading for the gate. Eventually, he stopped and dug his blanket out from his pack, wrapping it around himself as a makeshift cloak. People were still out and about, despite the storm. He felt them staring at him as he walked, but he didn't care.

As hurt as he was, he knew he could make it to Tallheart's clearing without putting himself in any serious danger. He wanted Ameliah to heal him, not that asshole at the guild. It was the principle of the thing. Charging for healing wasn't right, even if he could now afford it. He continually cursed himself for being stubborn as he trudged along, but he refused to give in. *I'm level 18, damn it. How the fuck did that go so wrong? Level 7 my ass.*