

223: Control

Progress Report

marker_1: eastspar_predate [3061 Light 05 13:50]
marker_2: grannybrain_2 [3061 Light 16 05:00]

Span: 10.6 days

Character

Total Exp: 2,736,316 -> 2,936,316 (+200,000)
↳ Mana Use: 200,000

Skills

Anchor Aura: +50,500 exp, 5 -> 8 (+3)
Prismatic Intent: +5 exp

Tolerance

Speed: 11.0 -> 14.0 (+3)

Synchronization

Recovery: 10.8 -> 11.0 (+0.2)
Endurance: 30.9 -> 31.0 (+0.1)
Vigor: 10.3 -> 11.2 (+0.9)
Speed: 9.5 -> 9.6 (+0.1)

The dialog shed no light on his surroundings, making the darkness in which Rain sat complete. The silence was almost as total, broken only by the comforting whisper of Ameliah's breath as she slumbered. They were aboard Temerity, held motionless in its icy scaffold, but the near-total quiet was from the hour rather than any runework. The work crews weren't scheduled to begin until the sun had risen.

The ship was deserted but for them, Staavo in his hammock on the level below, and Tarny down the hall. Tallheart would have been there too, but he was with his people. Cold and

inconvenience had driven everyone else ashore. For Rain, neither was a concern. Somebody needed to watch the ship. Somebody with the ability to Detect invaders. Somebody strong enough to repel them.

That he got to sleep within what was essentially a fortress didn't enter into it.

Rain sighed quietly so as not to wake Ameliah. Having her back was like having a blade removed from his throat. Likewise, the rapid progress he'd made in his soul in the predawn hours had him feeling hopeful. He was not going to have his brain blended. Everything was going to be alright.

Realizing he'd become distracted, he directed his thoughts back to the matrix of magic hidden in his cupped hands. He was *supposed* to be staying focused. This anchor would be for Force Ward, and it was particularly important for it to be high quality. Purify, Detection, Winter, and the like didn't need much power to be effective, but Wards did. If an anchor for one of those shattered, people would die.

He sighed again.

He'd set aside an hour before dawn each day for anchor making, with his only other mental break being the thirty minutes he'd allocated for extreme jogging. Despite all the practice, however, his best anchor was still only tier-two. He *could* make a tier-three. A million mana over the span of an hour was less than he could regenerate in that time, and he'd improved markedly since his first failed attempt. The trouble was that a million mana was also a million essence. A million *potential*. He'd known he couldn't afford that even before the Warden's lesson. Also, the only spell he had that would actually *require* such an anchor was Suppression, which wouldn't work well on one anyway. It had the same problem as the Wards. Of course,

there were other tier-three auras open to him, but that would require him to spend his skill point.

Obliterate (0/15)

217.21-248.24 Arcane (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment

Sufficient damage causes total disintegration

Not occluded by mundane materials

Ignores 50% of Arcane resistance

Range: 5.8 meters

Cost: 50 mp/s

Requires 10 ranks in Purify

Requires 10 ranks in Corrosion

Requires 10 ranks in Fulmination

Requires 10 ranks in Discombobulate

The skill card appeared with barely a conscious thought as Rain turned his head to look at it. The tier-four Offensive Aura it described remained as unimpressive as ever. He couldn't imagine taking it even if he'd had the skill points, let alone spending one hundred million potential on an anchor for it someday. He had inverted Arcane Ward to shred resistances already. The mana cost was high, the piercing was redundant, and he didn't need more ways to kill things, anyway. Unless the spell did something not listed on the card—possible—the only good thing about it was the name. Even that, he couldn't enjoy fully. There was a Yu-Gi-Oh joke in there somewhere, but it wasn't worth teasing out without anyone around to appreciate it.

Feeling like he was full of nothing but sighs at the moment, he shook his head, then looked at Ameliah. Perhaps 'looked' was the wrong word. His new senses were impeded not at all by the lack of light. He'd even managed to break the mental block that had forced him to keep his eyes open at first. Ameliah's soul shone like the sun, bright and warm in contrast to the dark and frigid room.

She'd listen if I tried to explain it. She'd pretend to be interested, too, because she's amazing. Not that I'm about to torture her describing 2000s Saturday morning TV. That's something you have to have lived through. Besides, we have more important things to talk about.

He bit his lip, chewing on it gently.

Is she okay after what happened with the cervidians? We haven't really had a chance to talk in private yet. What is she going to think about what the Warden told me? About what I can do now? We've only been apart a week, but we've both traveled so far down different roads. I almost feel like I'm a different person, I—

With effort, he stopped himself. He was being silly. He could *SEE* the connection between them. See its strength. Nothing about what had drawn them together had changed. There were linkages like that between all of Ascension's members, some weaker, some stronger, but all of them were undeniably real. No, Ameliah was back now, and the company was growing stronger in every sense. Everything. Would be. Alright.

...

And that's a flag.

...

Damn it.

There was a soft chime as the anchor solidified. A dialog appeared, but Rain didn't even glance at it, instead watching as Ameliah's soul flashed, breathing out, then in. She inhaled deeply in the physical world as well, releasing a soft sigh. The blankets rustled as she sat up.

Rain smiled, widening to a cheesy grin as he thought of just what to say. "Good morning, sunshine."

Velika moved at a crawl through the camp, gulls circling and cawing raucously above her as she waged a silent war against her traitorous limbs. To the birds, it must have seemed a slow and casual stroll. In reality, her motion was the result of a trembling frenzy of action, reaction, and overreaction. The tide of dulls flowing around her was likewise unaware of the battle she waged. A bead of sweat rolled down her forehead. The last thing she needed would be for an errant twitch to stave in a skull or rip a limb from a torso.

"Very good, you've proved your point," her nursemaid said, moving in front of her and planting his feet. He held out a wooden crutch, its twin tucked under his armpit. "If you won't just wait in your tent, at least use these. Do you want people to laugh when you fall?"

"Like I give a shit...what people do," Velika said through clenched teeth. Her voice didn't quaver, though she had halted for a moment. Only a lightning-quick burst of will had stopped the spastic twitch of her diaphragm that would have resulted in her braying like an ass. With effort, she began the laborious process of going around the person-shaped obstacle now in front of her. It would have been oh so easy to simply go *through*.

Her minder clicked his tongue, lowering the offered crutches with a defeated sigh, and she smiled. That was a win.

Training them is nearly as vexing as training my stupid body. Almost there now.

It took another few minutes, but eventually, she spotted her goal. The 'mess' was a fenced-off collection of tables near the center of Ascension's camp. She had no idea why they called it that, as the entire camp practically sparkled. Up until now, she'd been getting her meals ferried to her, but they never brought *enough*. The mess, though, was free all-you-can-eat,

confirmed by the folding sign propped near the entrance. It also listed the day's special in bold letters: '*Belgian waffles*' with springberries and fresh cream.

Velika doubled down on her focus, managing to squeeze through the gap in the fence without knocking over the sign. She had no idea what a 'waffle' was, and neither did she care. She could smell *meat*. The table at the back held the food, a depressingly long line of commoners snaking its way around the perimeter of the dining area.

"Here," her unwanted escort said, slipping past her and propping the crutches against a chair. "You just sit right here. I'll stand in line and get you—" He cut himself off with a sigh, then slumped defeatedly into the seat. "Be like that, then."

Smiling at her victory where the man couldn't see, Velika continued her hobbling progress toward the line. Her satisfaction didn't last long, however, as she only made it a few steps before a woman in a blue dress elbowed past her. Fortunately for her, Velika managed to pack her thoughts of murder safely away by the time she caught up.

"Oh, hey, sorry, did I cut in front of you?" the woman asked as Velika came to a trembling stop. "I'm just so hungry, and it smells so *good*, I— Here, you go first."

"It's fine," Velika grunted. "Just stay there. Like it makes a difference."

If she'd wanted to, she could have just gone straight to the table. No one would have stopped her. No one but her keeper would have even tried.

"Are you sure?" the woman asked, tilting her head. "Actually, you don't look so good. I can get you something if you want to sit down. I'd love to have someone to eat with. I just joined yesterday, so I don't know *anyone*. Oh! My manners. I'm Niriri, but please just call me Niri."

"Excuse me, miss," Velika's minder interrupted, having rushed over. "This is actually—"

"Velika," Velika said, whipping her head around to glare at him. Her voice came out a bit sharper than she'd intended, and a dagger of pain in her neck told her she'd moved too quickly, but she pressed on. "I can talk for myself, Beetle Butt."

"I have a name," Beetle Butt said tiredly.

Velika grunted. She knew perfectly well what his name was. He didn't need to know that, though.

"I'm...missing something," the woman ahead of her said. She looked around. "Actually, why is everyone looking at us? No, at *you*. Is he—sorry—are you her guard?" She looked back at Velika, seemingly confused by her roughspun outfit. "Are you someone important?"

Velika barked out a laugh. "Not anymore." She jerked her chin forward. "Line's moving."

"Oh," Niri said with a jump, taking a hasty step forward. "So, um..."

"Any idea what a *waffle* is?" Velika interrupted.

Niri blinked, then smiled. "I have no idea. I was actually just going to ask you."

Velika smiled back. "Well, then. I guess we'll find out together."

The tap of Tallheart's scribe on the silver-white puck of metal was lost under the roar of rushing air. Still, it had the desired effect. Romer, seated across from him at the workbench, paused with his own enchanting tool poised in midair. The human lifted his head quizzically, his short brown hair ruffled by the constant wind.

Rather than speaking, Tallheart simply tapped the soon-to-be filter with his scribe once more, indicating the offending rune.

Romer's brow furrowed, then he swore.

Tallheart nodded, returning to his own section. By the time he finished, the human Runescribe was still busy trying to correct his mistake. He had his notebook splayed open on the bench, pages fluttering as he leafed through them. Nibs was helping, sitting on the workbench beside her master, her ears clamped down against the wind. Occasionally, the cat would press a paw down on the corner of a page to hold it in place while Romer scribbled and crossed out rune after rune.

Tallheart smiled, watching the pair.

He could have completed the work himself, of course, but if he did, he would rob the fledgling Runescribe of the opportunity to progress. It would also have taken longer. This filter would be for molten salt. While Tallheart had a basic grasp of the intrinsic rune and could have brute-forced a working solution, Romer had advantages when it came to non-metals, despite his level.

Leaving the man and his feline assistant to work, Tallheart stood, stretching out his stiff neck. The tent—Engineering's current home for projects too impractical to pursue aboard *Temerity*

—was massive. It had open sides, but a staggered double row of panels had been erected to block the interior from view. The heavy canvas roof was primarily for blocking Scrying, held up by ashen poles strung with electric lights. Those were powered by the largest generator they'd ever made, driven by a likewise-massive steam engine and smelter. The wind came from a row of pulley-driven fans venting toward the sea to remove the fumes and keep everyone cool. The large smelter was being run constantly—producing iron, tin, copper, nickel, glass, and so forth.

Their work area was situated not far away, beside a second, smaller smelter. The experimental vessel had much thicker walls, festooned with pipework. A vestibule large enough to stand in enclosed the outlet, built of thick, perfectly clear plates of potion glass held in place by a framework of steel. It had been Staavo's idea, inspired by his work with the light bulbs. Its purpose was to shield the smelter's molten output from any contact with air, though it did not contain a vacuum. Nor did the light bulbs any longer, for that matter.

The old scholar was presently visible on the other side of the construction, standing with Myth, Reason, and Meloni beside a horse-sized glass tank of lime-gas. The valve that would feed the toxic vapor into the smelter was closed at the moment, that part of the process over with.

The four of them were arguing about something, gesticulating wildly, seemingly unconcerned about the poison-filled vessel so close to their elbows.

Tallheart rumbled, shaking his head. Corrin had a knack for Stonemolding molten glass, it was true, but it was still just glass when he finished. Even if this particular tank had been made from potion glass—which it was not, that effort having gone to the vestibule—glass of any

form did not seem like an appropriate material for this purpose. Unless, of course, you wanted it to break.

Lime-gas—'chlorine' to Chemists, 'fund-17' to Alchemists—was commonly sold in brittle flasks with exactly that in mind. Rain had been most unhappy when he had found out. Regardless of his admittedly justified concerns, lime-gas bombs were popular amongst low-level adventurers who could not afford anything stronger. Myth and Reason had refrained from selling them in Fel Sadanis—partly because they shared Rain's concerns, but mostly because Chemical attacks did not work well on Slimes. They still knew how to produce the gas, however.

They had split it from salt, leaving behind a metal Tallheart hadn't encountered outside of Rain's periodic table. Sodium, it was called, or fund-11. There was no name for it beyond its Chemical and Alchemical designations, for it had no common use outside those professions. Not until now. The filter Romer was still working on was made from it—from Heat Sodium, technically—prevented from tarnishing by a matrix of Chemical Resistance and Durability runes.

A new frontier.

Tallheart smiled. With Reason's assistance, it hadn't taken long to determine the metal's intrinsic rune, helped more by the purity of the Chemist's sample than his cryptic coaching. Being a component of salt, the metal's rune contained features common to that of the combined material. That allowed similarity targeting. Making a filter from salt directly would have removed the need for such advanced runework, but he was not a Stoneworker. Regardless, the extra effort would only be needed once if this went well. With the rune and a pure sample, he could make a filter for titanium *from* titanium.

Unfortunately, getting that sample was proving difficult.

The Adamants had done something to Temerity's hull. Something so subtle that he had only realized it when he had gone to remove the other metals from the alloy. The runes were *tangled*, for lack of a better word. They still registered to Order of Metal, but they *refused* to be separated from each other. It was an alloy not just in physical composition, but metaphysical composition as well. There was no skill any of them could point to that could have done such a thing, and yet, the effect was frustratingly persistent, similar to binding in a certain light. It had forced them to start from the beginning.

Tallheart rumbled again, glancing at a second glass tank installed not far from the chlorine. This one was filled with a faintly yellow, almost clear liquid.

Perhaps not entirely from the beginning.

Despite the tangling in Temerity's hull, it had taught him enough about titanium's rune to satisfy Identify Ore. The skill had revealed the metal to be abundant, though not so abundant as aluminum. Following his skill's guidance, he'd selected and pulverized the stones with the highest concentrations. The resulting powder was gone now, the titanium extracted by the chlorine and bound to it.

Supposedly.

It made little sense for a gas and a solid to make a liquid, but he was not a Chemist. It made little sense for salt to have metal inside it, either.

"How's this?" Romer shouted, tapping Tallheart unexpectedly on the elbow.

Blinking, Tallheart looked down to see the shorter human standing beside him and holding out the filter. He took it gently so as to not damage it, then inspected the runes. The error had been corrected, and with a solution even neater than the one he'd had in mind. After a few more moments of inspection, checking the piece as a whole, he nodded. "Excellent work. This should function."

"Thanks," Romer said proudly over the wind. He turned, calling out and waving his arms to attract the others' attention. "Hey! Hey, we're ready!"

Reason waved back, then began leading the others around the smelter. Romer turned again to Tallheart, then took a step to the side and scooped Nibs up from the table. "I'll go get Corrin and whoever's on boiler duty."

Tallheart rumbled, nodding his assent as he moved to stand beside the glass enclosure to wait. After a moment, Reason and the others joined him, Meloni busy retying her hair with a bandanna against the wind.

"What took so long?" Staavo asked, peering at the filter Tallheart held. "I thought I was going to die and rot away before you two finished."

"Staavo!" Meloni scolded. "Be nice. Also, you're not *that* old."

Tallheart grunted. "He is, though." He turned to stare at Staavo. "Like a dry raisin." He paused, then tilted his head. "Hmm, no. Raisins are sweet."

Things continued in this way for a few minutes, banter turning to discussions of the filter and the upcoming process before Romer finally returned, Corrin and Kettel in tow. After some brief instruction, the red-haired youth moved to the far side of the smelter and began blasting it with Firebolts.

"Where's Mereck," Myth called, looking around.

"He's coming," Romer called back, pointing. "I asked Ellis to get him."

"How hot d'ya want this thing?" Kettel asked, pausing his assault.

"Much hotter than that," Tallheart said, pressing a hand to the side of the smelter to check the sodium within. As expected, it was nowhere near melting.

There has to be a simpler way. If only Rain knew how his people had done this.

"Jus' say when, then!" Kettel replied, resuming his barrage.

A few minutes passed before Mereck appeared, panting. "Sorry," the former innkeeper wheezed. "I was on Velika duty, and she just found out what waffles are, so— Sorry. I'm here now."

"About time, safety officer!" Kettel shouted. "I was about ta' die of boredom!" He punctuated his statement with another blast of fire. "Hot enough yet? I ain't got infinite mana like some people!"

Tallheart rumbled, shaking his head. "No. More heat." He turned to Corrin. "Open it."

"Oh, that's us!" Meloni said, hurrying with Reason to the edge of the glass enclosure while Kettel downed a mana potion. She nodded to Reason, who nodded back, then both raised their hands toward the structure. "Okay."

"Here we go," the Geomancer said, touching the glass seal molded over the frame to hold the nearest panel in place. Meloni and Reason took on looks of concentration as he worked, glass flowing away from his fingers. The two Chemists were using Fume Control, as the argon filling the vestibule could not be allowed to mix with the outside air. It was all of the inert gas that they had, besides what was in the latest generation of light bulbs. Fuse—the spell Myth used to produce it—required a significant amount of mana. It also made Rain spit blood, which was an interesting side effect for a skill to have. It was a pity that it did not work well on metals. Otherwise, all of this trouble may not have been necessary.

Corrin grunted. "Almost done. Someone grab this panel."

As one, Mereck and Staavo stepped forward, taking the glass pane as it was freed, then carefully walking it to the side. The look of concentration on Meloni and Reasons' faces intensified.

"Hurry!" Meloni shouted, the strain clear in her voice.

Tallheart took a deep breath, then, careful of his antlers, slipped inside, ignoring the panel being hauled back into place behind him. He again touched the exposed side of the smelter, topping off its charge to maintain the heat-gathering enchantments, then probing the contents with his skills. The sodium inside was only just beginning to melt. More importantly,

the sealed vessel had maintained itself well enough that only a few contaminants had slipped inside.

Good.

He looked up, catching Kettel's attention, then signing to him in hand code. "More."

Myth, meanwhile, had moved to stand beside the lever that would flood the chamber with the titanium-containing liquid.

"When you're ready," the Alchemist signed.

Tallheart motioned for him to wait, then after one last inspection of the filter, slipped it into the slot designed to hold it. Next, he made sure a ceramic crucible was properly positioned beneath the spout before looking up again and nodding. There was no sense in letting the molten salt get everywhere.

Myth nodded back, turning the valve, and a tremor quickly grew, the side of the smelter vibrating in the unbreathable air. Tallheart straightened as much as he could, unconcerned. He had not designed it to fail. Once more, he placed his hand against the metal body, his brow furrowing as he realized the sodium was beginning to recrystallize.

We should have warmed the liquid first.

Shaking his head, he looked up. "More heat."

Kettel nodded, and crimson light flashed, but he stopped after only a few bolts.

"More!" Tallheart signed sharply. He was irritated, he realized. He did not want this attempt to fail.

Kettel glanced at Mereck, then shrugged and reached to his belt, extracting a second blue potion, which he downed before continuing his assault. He said something, his lips moving, and Romer nodded, darting off.

Unbreathing, Tallheart waited, straining his senses to the utmost. The sodium was molten again, but he couldn't sense any titanium yet, except...no. It was there, but faint. He could sense it, growing slowly, ever so slowly stronger as the heat continued to build. Before long, Romer returned, bringing Cessa with him, who walked over to lay a hand on Kettel's shoulder. Panting, he gladly made way for the higher-leveled Fire Mage.

'How hot?' she asked, Tallheart reading the words from her lips.

Doubting she knew hand code, he merely returned his gaze to the smelter, then jabbed a finger straight up. In the corner of his eye, he noted that the others had begun moving away. That was perhaps wise of them.

Cessa's first Firebolt struck, twice as bright as those Kettel had been producing. Tallheart knew for a fact that she was capable of more, but she could not exactly use Fireball without shattering the glass, enchanted or not. As she fell into a rhythm, he closed his eyes again, ignoring the beginning complaints of his lungs. Still, he waited, but before lack of air became an issue, he felt the filter beginning to fail from the heat. He could wait no longer.

This will have to do.

He pulled the lever.

Rather than the river of molten salt he'd expected, he was met by an explosion. The blinding torrent of vapor was enough to make his ears pop, a sharp snap telling him the toughened alchemical glass had broken somewhere, though it had not shattered. Unable to see and with his eyes stinging from vapors hot enough to overwhelm his resistances, Tallheart probed with his skills instead. Astonishingly, as the vapor continued pouring through the filter, he realized that the titanium he had sensed was not molten. The salt had boiled before the metal had even melted.

It is like the tungsten, over again. We need not have bothered with the filter.

Releasing the lever, Tallheart felt for the spout with his hands, grasping either side firmly and peeling the metal away like it was the rind of a rockmelon. He reached inside, finding the titanium bloom with the tip of a finger.

Knowledge exploded in his mind. He could see it clearly. The rune.

Order of Metal

The spongy metal responded, blisteringly hot flecks tearing themselves free from impurities as the unreacted sodium was driven away. He rumbled in satisfaction, the sound slightly deeper than usual to his ears as his long-held breath mingled with the argon and crystallizing salt.

Now, I can begin.