

141: Descent

Progression Tracker [0.6.0]

marker_1: afterfight [20th Fallow]

marker_2: predelve [21st Fallow]

span: 22.3 hours

Synchronization

Strength: 4.4 -> 5.3 (+0.9)

Focus: 10.1 -> 12.2 (+2.1)

Clarity: 200 -> 203 (+3)

Slots	Accolade	Bonus
4 [2x2]	The Ice Cavern	+40 Strength
4 [4x1]	The Halls of Corruption	+40 Focus
3	The Lair of Embers	+1,000 Heat Resistance
3	We Can't Just Call It 'The Lair'	+200 Force Resistance
2 [1x2]	The Solar Temple	+400 Stamina
2	Southshore Rat Warren	+1,000 Health
1	Everdeep Fortress	+10 Perception

Known Skill Trees

Tier 0: 144

Tier 1: 144

Tier 2: 144

Tier 3: 135

Tier 4: 0

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
22,749	22,750	1,644,832

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
Health	2,780	2,800	400/d
Stamina	999	1,000	500/d
Mana	11,700	11,700	2.4/s

Attributes

200/180	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	ACCLD	MISC	SYN
STR	9.54	90	10	40	40/40	10.6%
RCV	19.6	40	10	0	30/30	49.0%
END	12	30	10	0	20/20	40.0%
VGR	29	50	10	0	40/40	58.0%
FCS	29.3	120	10	40	70/193	24.4%
CLR	200	200	200	0	0/179	100.0%
PER	8.4	20	10	10	0/0	42.0%
SPD	9.4	10	10	0	0/1	94.0%

Resistances

1940/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	1543.0	0%
COLD	543.0	0%
LIGHT	3.0	0%
DARK	3.0	0%
FORCE	633.0	0%
ARCANE	43.0	0%
CHEMICAL	493.0	0%
MENTAL	3.0	0%

The second chasm was a fully enclosed fissure in the stone, smaller than the crack above. The mineshaft that led down from the surface continued on the other side for only a few dozen meters before being blocked by fallen debris. The fissure itself was passable, though with an uneven floor and walls tight enough in places to make swinging a sword difficult. It was rank

eleven for the most part—not that much worse than the lowest point of the first chasm. That said, it was considerably more dangerous because of the cramped conditions and the constant darkness.

Near the far end of the second chasm was another mineshaft—perhaps the same one having looped around, perhaps not. That passage sloped down for a few hundred meters until it came out high on the wall of the third and final chasm, which plummeted down deep. Tallheart had gone down there weeks ago, finding a natural cave system at the bottom that measured rank thirteen with Rain’s depth gauge. The cervidian was convinced that those caves extended deeper still, though he hadn’t explored far. He’d said he could ‘smell the depths down there,’ whatever that meant.

The term ‘depths’ was a catchall that described anything below the surface. When most people used it, however, they usually meant natural caves like those Tallheart had found. The entire planet was supposedly wormed through with tunnels, becoming increasingly complex and interconnected as you went deeper, complete with their own diverse monstrous ecosystems. There was no clear line that defined where the depths began, unlike lairs with their magical boundaries, so people generally specified things using the Guild’s terminology.

Rank thirteen was the transition point between shallow and deep bronze. Shallow silver started at twenty-five, transitioning to deep silver, then to shallow gold, and so forth. That continued all the way to rank one hundred—or so it was said. Outside of legends, nobody had ever made it that far.

Rain, Ameliah, and Tallheart were presently gathered at the mouth of the mineshaft that led to the third chasm, surrounded by the members of Ascension who’d come to see them off. They had already cleared all the monsters from the area, including those that had come up from the tunnel. Fresh evertorches burned along the walls. Now that the Fire Eater had been

defeated, Ascension would be keeping this area lit to take some of the pressure off of their defenses above.

All three delvers had heavy packs, though the word 'pack' was ill-suited to encompass their disparate burdens. Tallheart had what he called his 'mobile forge', being a u-shaped metal frame over his shoulders holding his anvil and various tools in the front, and a miniature smelter-forge hybrid in the back. Rain could feel his own spine compacting just from looking at it. The antlered smith also had what looked like a pair of metal toolboxes, one in either hand. These, Rain knew, were filled with ingots of various metals. It was a wonder that Tallheart wasn't leaving footprints in the solid stone.

Ameliah's pack was normal by comparison. It contained food, spare clothing, equipment, potions, water, and so forth—the kind of things you'd expect an adventurer to have. As for Ameliah herself, she was wearing her everyday travel clothing, sans cloak. She'd asked Rain to cut her hair, and he was proud to say that he hadn't made too much of a mess of it. It hung to her shoulders loosely, short enough to not get in the way without needing to be tied back, which was how she liked it. The only enchanted item she had was her utility knife, which she didn't use for combat. Her hands were bare, as she was currently specialized as a Fire Mage. The bonuses that she could have gotten from Cryst-level rings were piddly from a silverplate's perspective anyway.

As for Rain, like Tallheart, he was loaded both front and back. In his case, however, it wasn't the weight of his packs that was exceptional; it was their bulk. His backpack from yesterday's combat test had been too small, so he'd gotten a bigger one, and then another just like it to balance himself out. With the bulging packs strapped over his already bulky armor, he felt like some bizarre amalgam of a pack mule and the Michelin man.

The packs were rigged with a single ripcord that he could pull with his non-shield hand at a moment's notice. As before, that would free him of his burdens, should combat be required. The engineering effort required to get the release to work with two packs instead of one had warranted a name, Rain had decided, so he'd dubbed the completed contraption 'The Double Gangee.'

"Oi, Rain, yer sure ye've got all ye need?" Kettel asked, grinning. "I think I've got a spare pair'a boots I could give ye. Oh! Or some silver candlesticks! Wouldn't want ta be without those down there. Ye gots ta be ready fer anything! Like a wild travelin' dinner party!"

Rain laughed. "Thanks, Kettel, I don't think there's much chance of that."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure," Jamus said, smiling. "The depths are vast. Who is to say what you might find?"

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled in agreement.

Rain sighed. "Oh, come on. Not you too."

"You look like that lizard we fought in the Fells," Samson said, his arms crossed. "The Corpulent Gill Monitor."

"He do, don't he?!" Kettel slapped his thigh, then held out a hand toward Rain like a herald. "Behold! Our brave leader! Rain the Corpulent!" He snorted. "S'got a nice ring to it! Almost as good as the Night Cleaner!"

"I can hurt you," Rain said flatly.

A sudden explosive laugh from Carten made Rain turn his head. Ameliah had been having a separate conversation with him, Vanna, and Val, and from her smug expression, she'd been the source of Carten's amusement. Val and Carten glanced at each other as Rain looked over, then at Ameliah. Moments later, both of them both broke down completely, giggling like children. Vanna, in contrast, was rolling her eyes so hard that they seemed to be at risk of tumbling free from her skull.

"What did I miss?" Rain asked.

Carten managed to regain control of himself. He fixed Rain with a bearded grin, then jabbed a finger at Ameliah. "She said tha' she liked tha size'o yer sack!"

Rain did his best to imitate Vanna's eye-rolling as Carten once more lost his composure. *Ameliah can be just as bad as Carten sometimes. I can't in good conscience encourage this kind of low humor. A bawdy pun? For shame.* He shook his head, blushing slightly, but he was smiling when he replied. "Can everyone stop talking about my sack, please?"

This, of course, didn't help in the slightest. More laughter followed, and Rain patiently waited for it to die down while glaring at Ameliah with a look that said, *'See what you did?'*

Eventually, the laughter did stop, and Jamus reached out to lay a hand on Rain's shoulder. "You be safe down there, you hear me? And look after Tallheart. You know how he needs minding."

"I do not require minding," Tallheart said, triggering another round of chuckles.

"We'll look out for each other," Ameliah said. "Don't worry about us."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled.

"Still," Jamus said, turning to Tallheart. "Don't do anything reckless, my friend. I do not want to lose you."

Val laughed, gesturing at Kettel. "Just ask yourself what the kid would do, and then don't do that."

"Oi!" Kettel yelled.

"You're not one to talk, Val," Rain said, raising a hand to show that he was kidding. *Mostly*. He bit his lip, then glanced over his shoulder at the mineshaft. After taking a breath, he nodded, then returned his attention to the others. "I suppose this is it, then. No goodbyes. We'll be back within a month. Vanna, until then, you have the bridge."

"Thank you," Vanna said. "My first task as acting captain will be to get us a ship so your nautical sayings make sense."

"Probably wise," Rain said, nodding sagely before adopting a more serious expression. "We'll send you a message if we get in trouble or find something worth reporting."

"Until we get out of range," Ameliah added.

Rain inclined his head to her. "Right."

Like almost all system skills, Message was limited to one league—about five kilometers—no matter how much metamagic you had. It didn't do so well penetrating rock, though, which would bring the range down considerably. Rain had devised a different communication

method that wasn't subject to the system's limits, but not everyone here knew about that. Operational security and so forth, as it required accolades. Likewise, he didn't mention what Vanna was to do if they didn't return within the expected time frame. She already knew.

Rain tightened his fists, thinking of the various other contingency plans he'd put in place.
Ascension. Will. Not. Fall.

For all that he'd said no goodbyes, it took them another few minutes to disengage. The three of them walked silently down the mineshaft in the pool of Ameliah's Lunar Orb, listening to the fading sounds of those they'd left behind.

"Do you think they'll be okay?" Rain asked, looking at Ameliah.

"They'll be fine," Ameliah said, the warmth fading from her tone as if it had been stolen by the pale light.

"But what if—"

"They'll be fine," Ameliah repeated more firmly. "They're as safe as we can make them. If anything, our leaving will help them get stronger."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "A chick only learns to peck when the mother hen leaves the nest."

"I—what?" Ameliah asked, looking at him. "Is that a cervidian saying?"

"No," Tallheart said. "My people have no use for chickens. We do not keep them."

"Huh," Ameliah said. "I guess I've never heard that one."

Rain smiled, fussing with the clasp of one of the Double Gamgee's numerous pouches. The talk of chicken was making him hungry all of a sudden. He pulled out a strip of Sakeren Jerky, then gestured with it. "Anyone want anything to eat? I brought snacks."

"I'm fine," Ameliah said.

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "No, thank you."

"You're sure?" Rain asked. "I've got some of those fried crunchy fern things you like."

"Later," Tallheart said.

"Suit yourself," Rain said through a mouthful of jerky. He pointed down the dark tunnel.

"Ameliah, there's a monster about thirty meters ahead, around the bend."

"What kind?" Ameliah asked.

"No idea," Rain said with an unconcerned shrug.

Ameliah frowned, glancing at Rain's shield.

"It's not that," Rain said, shaking his head. "I've mostly got a handle on the interference now as long as I remember to focus. It's just that whatever kind of monster that is, it's not one I've encountered before. It isn't moving."

"Okay, stay back," Ameliah said, sending her light to hover around Rain's head. She slipped out of her pack, setting it on the ground. "I'll go deal with it."

"Hold on, you don't need to—" Rain started, but she was already gone. Flames sprung up around her as she dashed forward, filling the tunnel with orange light. The fire almost seemed to be propelling her down the tunnel, though Rain knew Shrouded by Flame did nothing of the sort. She was just that fast. The orange light faded as she rounded the curve in the tunnel, but soon it returned with a vengeance, accompanied by a whump of detonation and a blast of hot air.

Your party has defeated [Lesser Rockshell], Level 9
Your Contribution: 1%
0 Experience Earned

Not long after that, Ameliah appeared back from around the bend, still blazing as she jogged toward them. "There. Problem solved," she said. "Anything else around?"

Rain shook his head. "What was it?"

Ameliah raised an eyebrow, her fiery cloak going out. "I only got ninety-nine percent. I assumed you got the rest. Didn't you see a message?"

Rain nodded. "I did, but I have no idea what a Rockshell is." He stuck the remaining piece of jerky between his teeth, then bent to pick up Ameliah's pack and offered it to her.

Ameliah shrugged, accepting the pack. "It was some sort of crab thing. I didn't stop to paint a picture of it."

"Rockshells are a common creature of the depths," Tallheart said. "There are many kinds, most with an aspect. What was the exact name?"

"Lesser Rockshell," Rain said, still chewing.

"Hmm," Tallheart said. "No aspect. We are fortunate. It seems we will begin in a neutral biome."

"Whatever," Ameliah said, turning back to Rain. "Will you be able to sense them now?"

Rain wiggled his hand as the three of them resumed their progress down the tunnel. "Lesser Rockshells specifically, yes. Rockshells as a category, I'm not sure. You didn't have to run ahead, Ameliah. We could have fought it together. It was only level nine."

"Yes, and we didn't know that," Ameliah said, sounding annoyed. "I'm not taking chances."

"Fair enough," Rain said, digging in his pack for another piece of jerky. He wasn't particularly worried about himself yet, but their supplies were another matter. He might be monster-proof, but the Double Gamgee wasn't.

He stuffed the piece of meat into his mouth, chewing with enthusiasm as he activated Essence Well to send Ameliah a little mana. *Damn, this stuff is good. I hope we find some nice plant monsters for Tallheart down here.*

Rain shook his head as they passed the remains of the Rockshell. If it had been a crab, there was no way to tell, now. Other than a few charred bits of shell, there was nothing left but a blackened pile of ash, still smoking slightly. *She is NOT kidding around. Was that Fireball, or something else?*

He reached for his pouch of jerky again, then forced himself to stop. *Gotta save the good stuff. Who knows what we'll be eating a few days from now.* To distract himself, he voiced his question aloud. "So, Ameliah, was that Fireball that you used?"

"No," Ameliah said. "Just an Overcharged Firebolt. I didn't want to damage the tunnel."

"That's...terrifying," Rain said honestly. "I think I need to check my math."

Ameliah shrugged. "There's a reason Fire Mages are so common. It might not be a fancy build, but it has plenty of power. The only issue is how narrow it is."

"Yeah," Rain said, nodding. Ameliah had picked the class partly because of how resistant Rain was to Heat. An equally resistant monster could present a problem.

Rain scratched at his beard, then closed his visor to put another barrier between himself and the jerky. "That reminds me. What happens if we find a Heat biome? Will you change your build?"

Ameliah shook her head. "It depends how deep we are. It takes me a lot of time to switch."

"You really haven't found a way to speed that up?" he asked.

"No," Ameliah said with a sigh. "It takes one hour per skill. Always. The only thing that's gotten better with practice is how much I need to concentrate on it. I can usually keep it going now while I do other things, but if something distracts me too much...boom. Start over."

Rain frowned. "Damn, that's annoying. Maybe it will get better at gold."

"I'm sure it would," Ameliah said. "If I ever got there."

"You will," Rain said. "We all will. One day."

"Hmph," Tallheart snorted. "Even below the earth, your head remains in the clouds. You remind me of me."

Rain smiled. "Anyway, we're almost at the third chasm. I can sense the gap now. No more monsters yet."

"Okay, stay back from the edge while I check," Ameliah said, walking out in front. She stopped, then held up a hand. "Actually, just stay right there. Get a torch going so I can bring my light with me."

Something in her tone made him stifle his argument against wasting a torch. *What's eating her?*

"Hurry up," Ameliah said.

Rain did his best, fumbling an evertorch free from his pack, then lighting it with a spark lighter. Ameliah's expression had hardened even more as she watched him go through the gymnastics required to do this, burdened as he was by his packs and the shield on his left arm.

"There," Rain finally said, straightening and holding the torch aloft.

"And you're sure you don't want to leave some of that stuff behind?" Ameliah asked, giving him a look.

"Absolutely sure," Rain said. "Once we're deeper, we'll camp, clear, and then move, just like Tallheart says. I won't bring all this with me when we're clearing. For now, it's safe enough."

"Fine," Ameliah said, crossing her arms. "But you two will be staying with the supplies once it comes to that. I'll be doing the clearing, not you."

"No," Tallheart said, shaking his head slowly. "We must all work together. I will not allow you to protect Rain by taking the danger upon yourself."

Rain nodded. They'd had this argument before. He opened his mouth to continue it, but Ameliah cut him off.

"Just stop," she snapped. "We'll talk about this later. Right now, I'm checking the chasm. End of discussion."

"I...sorry," Rain said.

"Don't move," Ameliah said, walking away. She took her Lunar Orb with her, leaving him and Tallheart alone in the pool of torchlight.

"Hmm," Tallheart rumbled.

Rain nodded in agreement, keeping his mouth shut. *This place... That has to be what's bothering her. It must remind her of Brightside. The third chasm is similar enough to what she described, though it isn't full of poison mist. I wonder how long it's been since she came down this far?*

He shook his head, then glanced at Tallheart. "How are you doing?"

Tallheart raised an eyebrow.

Rain gestured awkwardly. "You know...with being in the depths again."

"I am fine," Tallheart said, his face unreadable. He looked away. "Do not lower your guard. Something could have spawned behind us by now."

Rain nodded. *I owe them both so much.*

The wait for Ameliah to return quickly grew to be intolerable. Rain tracked her for as long as he could with Detection, and then by the echoing sounds of explosions once she'd gone past the edge of his range.

It was almost twenty minutes before she finally re-appeared, the last ten having been nail-bitingly silent. Rain practically collapsed in relief as Detection picked her up, though rationally he knew that linksight would have told him if anything had happened to her. She was still in the party; the system just wasn't giving him notifications for her kills. This wasn't a lair, and he'd had nothing to do with them.

A few moments later, Ameliah appeared at a run, slowing only as her orb's light merged with that of their torch. "Clear," she said. "Any problems here?"

"No," Tallheart said. "What took you so long? Rain was becoming distressed."

"I was not," Rain said.

"I was scouting around," Ameliah said. "Now come on, before something spawns. I left a few burning corpses, but they won't stay lit forever."

"How often should we be expecting spawns, anyway?" Rain asked as the three of them continued.

"Constantly," Tallheart said.

"Yes, but like how fast?" Rain asked, pausing as the edge came into view. Unbidden memories of a certain Umbral Charger had popped into his mind.

"It is the same as above," Tallheart said.

Rain frowned, speaking as he extricated himself from his packs for the descent. "Right. So, for a given area, only so many monsters can spawn in a day. The rate depends on the essence level, the new monsters' levels, and what other monsters are nearby. Since Ameliah just cleared out a bunch of them, the chance of a spawn is higher, right?"

"Yes," Tallheart said.

Rain nodded to himself. *Just like when I was trapped outside the Fells, then.*

"How are we getting down?" Ameliah asked.

Tallheart walked right up to the edge and looked down. He grunted, then tossed the two metal cases he'd been carrying over the side. Six seconds later—Rain counted—there was an almighty clang of impact, followed by a monstrous screech and a clatter of tumbling metal ingots.

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "It appears that something has spawned. I believe I hit it."

Holy shit, and it didn't die? That had to have been at least a hundred kilos of metal at...who the hell knows how fast. I'll do the math in a second.

Rain glanced at Ameliah to gauge her reaction, but Tallheart distracted him by jumping over the edge. Rain gasped as the cervidian spun in mid-air, rock cracking from his grip as he caught himself on the lip of the chasm. Cracking booms echoed from the walls as he began his descent. From the sound of it, he was making his own handholds by literally kicking holes into the solid cliff face.

"Well," Rain said. "I suppose that works. It's not particularly subtle, though."

"Not particularly, no," Ameliah said over the continuing racket. "At least it will make a good distraction for us. Do you feel like climbing too, or would you rather jump?"

"I'll climb," Rain said, thinking of the fragile supplies he'd brought. He'd have said 'fly,' but he knew Ameliah didn't have the spell anymore. That was another argument he didn't want to have. Redirection was better for combat, true, but it just wasn't the same. In a chasm like this, proper flight would have come in extremely handy.

He pinged with Detection again, still not finding the bottom of the chasm, even this close to the edge. He frowned, setting down the torch and kneeling to extract a coil of rope from his pack. *One hundred meters should be enough, right? I wish they had nylon. This stuff is too thick. I could have brought way more. Actually, wait, I could ask Tallheart to make me some metal cables or something.* He shook his head. *Later.*

He searched his memory, then muttered a curse to himself under his breath. *Damn. I can't remember the freefall formula. This isn't the time to be mucking around with Winter, though, so I guess I'll just derive it. Speed should be acceleration times time, and I can integrate that for distance, so... $d = 1/2at^2$.* He smiled. *Yeah, that's right. Now I remember. Even with overmana, I guess I can still have brain farts. Okay, I'll assume g is still $9.8m/s^2$ on this planet, which I can round to 10 to make my life easy. Six seconds of falling means... 180 meters. Damn. I'm going to need to tie two coils together. Hell, three to be safe.*

"Rain?" Ameliah asked. "Why are you staring into space? Did you sense something?"

"Sorry, sorry," Rain said, fishing out another rope. "I was just calculating how far down it was."

"Calculating?" Ameliah asked. She sighed. "I'm going to regret this, but...how would you even do that?"

"Calculus," Rain said, tying knots as he spoke. "I counted how long it took for Tallheart's cases to hit the bottom. Stuff falls with a constant acceleration, ignoring air resistance, and you can use that fact to derive the formula for the distance. I could explain how, but this isn't the time. For now...hmm. Damn, it doesn't really work in common. Anyway, just remember five times time times time. That will get you close enough. Oh, that's in meters, obviously."

"Obviously," Ameliah said, watching Rain as he began lowering his pack over the edge. "You're still checking for monsters, right?"

"Yes," Rain said, beginning to let the rope slide quickly through his hands. The sound of breaking stone stopped after a moment, then there was a brief silence before a faintly-heard crunch.

"Sounds like Tallheart's reached the bottom," Ameliah said.

"Samwise, too," Rain said, feeling the rope go slack. He tossed the end over the edge to join the pack below.

"I still can't believe you named your pack," Ameliah said, shaking her head.

"And I can't believe we never thought to name the Forgewagon," Rain said. He concentrated, nudging one of his Focus-boosting accolades out of its slot and replacing it with the one that enhanced his grip strength. As he approached the edge, his stomach clenched up, but he pushed through the vertigo, refusing to let his fear show. He swung his legs over the edge, then lowered himself down to hang near where Tallheart had started. His current effective Strength made it easy, but he panicked anyway, scrambling until his foot found the first of the smith's improvised handholds.

Ameliah watched, frowning slightly. She walked right up to the edge, moving her light to help him see what he was doing.

Rain was immensely grateful to her for that, and for not commenting on his struggles. This wasn't something he'd exactly done before, and his heart was beating fast as irrational terror tried to make him freeze. He'd thought he'd conquered his fear of heights, and perhaps he had, but clearly, his fear of subterranean chasms was still there in force.

Something we have in common, I guess. I refuse to let it stop me. I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer.

Rain grit his teeth, then removed his hand from the edge, grasping for a lower handhold. The fall wasn't dangerous. Not with all of his Force Resistance and Force Ward on top of it. Even his base health was probably more than enough at this point. That didn't mean it *felt* safe.

Step by careful step, Rain crawled his way down the wall. He nearly fell twice, but the accolade proved its worth, making him feel like Spider-Man the way it helped his hands stick to the stone. Ameliah followed after him, though she could have easily jumped, keeping the Lunar Orb positioned so Rain could see. She made it look easy, literally only using one hand, as she'd brought the torch in the other.

Finally, they reached the bottom. Rain looked around, not seeing Tallheart, though the smith was clearly nearby. The sound of his hammer was ringing through the deserted chasm, the echos making it hard to determine the direction. From where he was standing, Rain could see two dark passages leading off the fissure itself, which was strewn with metal bars and still-smoldering monster corpses. He had to resist the urge to immediately use Purify to wipe them away. He wanted to have a look at them before he did that so he could get an idea of what was waiting for them and if any of it was edible. Besides that, corpses were also useful for keeping monsters occupied, Tallheart had said. Anything that spawned would be distracted by the free meal before it went searching for them.

"Here," Ameliah said, hefting Rain's pack, then handing it to him.

"Thanks," Rain said, slipping it back on, then starting to reel in the rope. He pinged with Detection, then gestured. "Tallheart's that way."

Ameliah nodded to him, following. They found Tallheart squirreled away in a narrow crack in the stone, blocked with the shattered remains of a few crabby things that must have been Rockshells. He'd set up his anvil and was busy pounding his ingot cases back into shape. His

enchanted spectacles were perched on his nose, which Rain knew would allow him to see in complete darkness.

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled in greeting. "I will require a few minutes. I would like to test the rocks here for metals before we continue."

"No worries, Tallheart," Rain said, setting his pack down beside the broken monsters Tallheart was using as a door. "I wanted to take a little break, anyway. I'll go collect all the ingots and check for Crysts and stuff. Ameliah, can you make sure nothing eats me while I do that, please?" His stomach rumbled. "And after that, maybe we can hide in there with Tallheart and have breakfast? The monsters will leave us alone if we stay quiet, right?"

Ameliah snorted, seemingly having relaxed a little bit, though she was still watching the darkness warily. "Didn't we have breakfast before we left?"

Rain smiled. "We had one, yes. But what about second breakfast?" He chuckled to himself at the long-suffering look this got him.

"That's a reference to something, isn't it?" Ameliah asked.

Rain nodded. *Ah, screw it. So what if I'm not done recovering the books yet? It's going to take me ages to read it out loud anyway. I'll be able to keep up, and it will help her get her mind off things.*

He smiled. "While we eat, I think it's finally time for me to start telling you about hobbits."