

“List my abilities, divided by starting prerequisite. Show the result side by side.”

I’m surprised that four windows appear. Looking the list over, I’d worked out there were three trees. I think I’d put the Field Research tree inside Planning Ahead.

The other surprise is just how much falls within Momentum and how few under Taking it on the Nose. When looking for abilities I could make use of as a guard, it felt like the bulk of explorer abilities fell under that one, that most of what I’d put on when planning my build fell under that, instead of already being exclusively under Momentum.

I already have that, and since there isn’t anything after Bob and Weave, and for the dodge bonus it gives me, I still like it for my second ability. It won’t be as useful if I focus on archery, but I figure there will be plenty of time when I’ll have to fight close quarters. It still comes after I’ve hit level five in Momentum, so my immediate decisions have to be about Field Research and Planning Ahead. Looking over the rest of the Taking it on the Nose tree hasn’t changed my opinion about how it’s more for showmanship than actual fighting.

The Field Research tree feels geared toward the professional monster hunter, which I have no interest in. It’s all boosts based on monsters they kill. In the same vein, Planning Ahead and the rest of its tree seem to push for the archaeologist, at least the way Grandpa Louis talked about them, and the Indiana Jones movies I watched. I can see the appeal, but my goal is still to return home after this, and become a guard.

Which means Momentum is still the tree I need to focus on, but I have to change how I look at it. Instead of Hit and Run, I need to open the At it all Day branch. That one outright means I’ll be able to travel further in a day. The fifty percent reduction to stamina cost mean I can run instead of walk, and since it needs to be level five before the other abilities are accessible, I’ll be at a seventy percent reduction, and it’s only six more levels to bring it down to basically zero, letting me run as hard as I want all day long. That’s definitely going to be good for getting there and back.

Then Sprinting Step increases how fast I can move, and Aether Striding opens up teleportation. Blink seems more like a combat teleport, and considering I have no mana to speak of, and all the ways my speed is increased, I don’t know if it’s going to be worth the investment needed to get my Aether attribute up to where it’s going to be able to handle the kind of costs teleportation has to require.

Treasure Steps and Windfall feel like the system is trying to get the archeologists to spend points in this tree, with making it easier to quickly find caches within ruins, and increasing how much they get out of it. If my goal was researching ruins, I don’t know that I’d want to spend ten points just to be able to start this.

Launching Stride and Rebounding Leaps are definitely set as complement to Momentum, and they are tempting. Momentum might not be all that useful for traveling, and making sure I return home quickly, but there is something undeniably fun about running up a wall. With those, I’d be able to get a jumping start that reaches higher and keep jumping any gaps too large to run across.

Then the Hit and Run tree puts offensive capabilities in.

I want to take that one. I spent so much of my life training to fight that not taking it hurts. The idea I could take it with my next level makes that even harder to resist.

Which makes planning my build ahead of time even more important.

I have four points and those have to go into Momentum. The one after that has to be

At it all day. Then, one point in Bob and Weave as well as Hit and Run makes sense. It boosts my base defense and offense capabilities.

But then, I have to put the next four points in At it all Day so I can take Sprinting Step.

After that... I'm not sure. Increasing At it all Day and Sprinting Step feel like my best choice, boosts my traveling capabilities. But is there a point where it won't be worthwhile anymore? And that's eight level away. Who knows where I'll be by then. I'll probably be back home. Gaining levels isn't quick.

I write Launching Stride and Rebounding leap under Sprinting Step with question marks. I mean, where ever I am by then, I'll deserve a treat, right? I put the page into the journal, then send that and the stylus into my inventory.

I swipe the windows away and invest my four points into Momentum, then consider my attributes.

I want to increase my strength. Being human average isn't great. With the three points I have, I could get it to thirteen, which would move me to the next inventory tier, and five extra slots. There would also be an increase in my damage, but nothing significant.

But with the traveling I'm doing, it makes sense to boost my endurance and increase my stamina. And it comes with an increase in my damage soak, so it helps my fighting too. But, that goes up each level through my class, so doesn't it make it redundant to put more points there?

Fuck, why is this so hard?

Split the difference? Two in endurance and one in strength? Only what's the point of putting anything there and not enough to get the extra slots? I kept bitching about not having enough inventory space, wasn't I? Even with the packs and backpack, my personal inventory is the only one that can hold two stacks per. More stuff is always better, isn't it?

My pained groan has a woman look in my direction and offers a sympathetic smile. I guess I'm not the only one suffering through this.

Of course, now I have to wonder when I turned into such a hoarder. It's not like I'm going out there to pile stuff in my inventory. The goal is to deliver the letter and come home. That means focusing on traveling. Which means Endurance gets it.

Or, I could wait until I need to raise a stat.

I push away from the table angrily. It's not like I need to be here to deal with that. I have my abilities lined up for my build and the skills I wanted. The attribute points I can take care of anytime I want.

I stretch. Okay, how long have I been sitting here?

Making my way down the stair I spot the lupine guard who helped me and head in her direction. Her ears turn before her head, then she smiles at me.

"Were you able to get the skills you wanted?"

"I did, and I was able to line up my abilities. I just wish my attributes were easier to deal with. I want more points so I can put them everywhere."

She chuckles. "That's where the attribute training skills come in."

"I guess." I run a hand over my face. "Do you know where I can get repair kits for leather armor?"

"Any leathershop will have those."

“Sorry, I mean the magical kind. Dealing with all that,” I motion behind me, “has my brain on the fritz.”

She chuckles. “You might be able to find one in a leathershop, but your best bet would be an adventurer’s store.”

“Where can I find one of them?”

“Your best bet is the West Caravan Market, since there’s a lot of wilderness on the west side. You might be able to find someone with a booth at Lake Crossing, but there’s no guarantee there.”

“Thanks.” I take a step. “Oh, do you know the Champlain Club is?”

“The explorer’s club? I know of it. It’s in Adelaide.” She looks me over. “You aren’t thinking of going there, are you?”

“Well...”

“Do you know how to use that?” She nods to my sword.

“My skill’s eighteen.”

She doesn’t like my answer. “I can’t stop you, but if you are going there, stay on your guard. The club is in the middle of that place and we have the worse time keeping crime low there.”

“Why did they put the club there if it’s so bad?”

She shrugs. “It was there before the area went bad. I think it dates back to before the system, although not as an explorer’s club, of course. Just be careful.” She hesitates. “But if you are heading there, the club is someplace that will almost certainly have one of those magical repair kits. Explorers are always going places they shouldn’t and getting themselves hurt and their stuff damaged.”

“Are there a lot of them?”

She shrugs. “I heard stories, that’s all.”

“Thanks for the information.”

“Be careful,” she repeats in a stern tone as I walk away.

Richmond is one street south of Queen; I saw a sign on my way here. Then I walk east until I reach Sherburn and... okay, I can sort of see why this place has a bad reputation.

The buildings on that side of the street look to have been hastily put up without anyone speaking to each other. As I walk along, looking for some way in, all I see are narrow alleys between building that are much darker than they should be, considering the afternoon sun. I reach Berkey, and go along that and the buildings continue to look in such disrepair one might fall down if I step too hard. I turn right on Elizabeth and continue to look for something that could be the club. Another right on Sherburn. And still, nothing I’d be confident about walking into, all the way back to Richmond.

The houses on the other side of the road have gates on their doors and windows. I don’t think they’ll answer if I knock. I go back to Queen and at fourth store I ask someone finally knows about the Champlain Club. Or at least is willing to admit to knowing and tells me it’s ‘somewhere in the center of that rat’s den’.

So if I want to go there, I have to go through that.

Because she said in the center, I find the alley that’s the most centered on Richmond and straighten as I step into it. Grandmother often said that: *“a lot of the time looking like you’re ready to fight is enough to discourage your opponent. So be sure you look ready,*

and if that's not enough, make sure the pointed end goes into them before they do the same to you."

My hope of easily finding the club disappears when the alley makes a hard right. Then another, and a left before if come to a T-junction. On my right I see Richmond. On the left, gloom from the buildings leaning against each other and blocking the light. They didn't look more than three stories along the road, but here, it feels like they go on much higher.

That's not possible within a civilized zone, right?

I make the left, then come across a four-way intersection that's wide enough it might be used as a courtyard by the occupants...if there are any. This place is eerily quiet.

I make a left, hoping to find a way toward the center again, but it goes on for a long while before there's a turn to the right. I take it. The next right will take me closer.

Of course, I'm forced to go left first, then left again, before there's a right. Then I hit a four-way intersection and I have no idea which way to go.

I pick one. The worse that'll happen is that I'm going to end up outside.

No, that's not the worse that can happen, but I'm not thinking about having someone, maybe something, jump me while I'm in here.

Oh, I really wish I hadn't had that thought. Because now I can't help feeling eyes on me and a shiver runs down my spine.

I'm at another intersection, wondering just where the outside is, or when someone will just assault me, when the tension is broken by a woman's scream.

I run in its direction, sword drawn and the people at the back of the alley register after I've passed it. Three, maybe four, not well dressed.

It's three, I confirm when I stand in its mouth, plus the woman on the ground, clutching a ripped shirt to her chest.

"Stop!" I order, as one of them undoes his pants.

The three of them casually turn to face me, would be rapist buttoning up his pants.

"What do we have here?" the man on the left says. He's like a reed and wavers like he's caught in a wind.

"Who cares?" the one on his right says, pulling a knife. "We bleed him and loot his stuff." He runs at me.

I don't give him the chance to reach me. I have range with my sword over his knife, so I'm stabbing and swinging at him, forcing him back, but I don't follow. Getting them around me gives them the advantage. If I can just draw them away from—

"You keep an eye on her," would be rapist says. "But don't touch her. I go first. Remember, you get the sloppy seconds."

Okay, so against two, my odds are better. And Grandmother had us practice this a few times. Of course not one of us had trained to fight with someone else, so I don't know how well this is going to go, but would be rapist pulls a knife too, so I still have the reach advantage. So long as they don't throw it.

I take rapid steps toward rapist, stabbing and swiping. I even manage to cut him, leaving a thin red line on his chest that's bound to get infected. Unfortunately, I get too wrapped up in my success and the other tackles me, sending my sword clattering away.

My punch to his face is reflex more than anything and it hurts, but he backs off, holding his bleeding nose. He says something that sounds like a threat, but it's muffled by

his hand.

I straighten. "How about you leave now?" I ask and pray they can't hear the tremble in my voice.

Rapist smirks, putting his knife away. "Nah. Now that we're equally armed, I think it's time you learned to mind your own business."

"Not that he's going to mind anything after I gut him," bloody nose says.

"Wait your turn." Rapist runs at me, fist raised.

I really wish I'd kept hold of my sword as he pummels me. I might have blocked a few of them. I can't tell by the time I'm on the ground. I was really hoping I'd be able to soak punches.

He grabs my hair and pulls. "This is what you get for not minding your business." He punches me.

"I want a turn at him," a woman says and I try to look away as she steps before me, bare-chested, a nasty smile on her face. She rears a foot and I ready myself.

"Really?" A man says. "You're going to kick a man not only while he's down but while he's held there? And here I was thinking the women of this fine city were of the decent kind."

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