

091: Essence

Four hours.

For four hours, Rain had trained like a maniac. He'd probably done more pushups, situps, and squats than he'd ever done in his whole life, just in that short span. Only now, lying flat on his back and feeling like he was going to die, would he admit that he might have gotten a bit carried away.

He had started out feeling strong. Too strong. It was Stamina that was doing it. Yes, his body was stronger due to Strength, and theoretically tougher thanks to Endurance, but that wasn't enough to explain how easy everything had been. It was the buffer provided by Stamina that let him just keep going and going, like the rabbit from the battery commercials.

When he started, he'd had around four hundred stamina. The pushups had been trivial thanks to his boosted Strength, and they had *stayed* trivial. Normally, each one would have been a little harder than the last as his muscles got worn out. However, that didn't start happening until his stamina dipped below two hundred or so. Back in the realm of humans, things had begun feeling a bit more familiar. He'd started having to switch exercises every so often to give his muscles a rest.

Still, he hadn't stopped.

Purify had let him keep going. He knew that the whole lactic acid thing was a myth and that it had nothing to do with muscle soreness, but it made sense to him that there would be waste products of some kind. The fact was that Purify worked, and it hardly mattered why. It hadn't erased his fatigue, far from it, but it had helped with the pain.

And there had definitely been pain. As he kept going, his health had actually started to drop. He'd almost stopped when he saw that, but a glance at his Strength tolerance had convinced him to continue. The first two hundred stamina that he'd spent had only gotten him a single point of tolerance. The next hundred had gotten him two points, corresponding to the increase in difficulty. The final hundred stamina to get down to zero had netted him three, confirming that how hard you were pushing yourself mattered more than the actual stamina expenditure.

Getting to zero stamina had been one of the hardest things that he'd ever done. He'd had to slow down, waiting longer and longer between each set of exercises to give his body time to recover. It wasn't like all those times when he'd slowly drained his stamina over the course of a day. The fatigue had felt like a physical thing, sitting atop his back as he forced his body to keep going. Low stamina made every movement more tiring, and his muscles had been screaming for rest. The desire to just give up had been overwhelming. He wouldn't stop, though. Couldn't stop. He was tired of being weak.

All in all, the first round of training had taken a little over an hour and cost him four hundred points of stamina and sixteen points of health. It had earned him six points of Strength tolerance, two points of Endurance tolerance, and one point of general stat buff tolerance.

Amazing progress. Better than he'd hoped.

He'd paused then, to recover and to think. There had been no response to his calls for help. Plan A was a failure. Detection showed that the tunnels leading to the surface were blocked, though he couldn't get much detail on the nature of the blockages. There was stone everywhere; searching for stone at a high resolution was overwhelming.

Plan B was likewise a failure, in that it didn't exist. He'd yet to think of anything better than his current course of action.

So, after he'd eaten a pair of ration bars to toughen up his jaw, he'd chugged a stamina potion and kept going.

The potion had brought him back up to three hundred stamina but had done nothing for his tired body. The ring had solved that little issue. He'd lowered his Endurance deliberately, sacrificing ten stamina at a time. To his delight, it had worked precisely as he'd expected it to. Each puff of overstamina had made him feel just a little stronger. He'd sacrificed the full hundred, ending up sore, but no longer tired. Then, he'd reset the ring and continued.

Getting back to zero had been an excruciatingly slow process. It took him almost twice as long this time. By the end of it, he'd lost another forty health, but improved his Strength tolerance by another six points, Endurance tolerance by three, and general stat buff tolerance by two. He'd kept adjusting the ring as he went, adding points to both stats as they increased; however, he'd decided not to remove the points from Focus to compensate. That was where he had made his first mistake.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. At that point, his total buff had been sitting at 168, 33 points past his general tolerance. He'd started to feel the warmth in his bones that signaled he was pushing too hard, but he had refused to relent. 'Pain is weakness leaving the body,' and 'the burn says it's working' and all that. Compared to the complaints of his muscles, the slight warmth had been nothing, barely an inconvenience. His tolerance had never improved quickly, and he'd figured that the reason was that he hadn't been pushing himself hard enough.

Two more ration bars and another Stamina potion had met their fates.

The potion had worked, just as it had before, and so had the trick with the ring. The tiredness once more vanished; however, the pain had been even greater this time, forcing him to slow down further still. As he'd continued training, it had grown worse and worse, as did the fire within his bones. The gains, however, had been extraordinary, so he'd pushed through it, earning seven more points of Strength tolerance, four points of Endurance, and three of general. No matter how much his body had complained, he'd refused to stop.

In retrospect, that might have been unwise.

Rain was currently lying on the floor, struggling to breathe. His heart was beating like a bird's, and his lungs were burning as he fought to keep himself from hyperventilating. He barely had the presence of mind to stop himself from just tearing the ring from his finger completely. Instead, he was forcing himself to slowly decrease the buff to Strength, ten points at a time.

With each decrease, he felt a little better, the fire within his bones retreating to be replaced by a deep, lingering ache. His tortured muscles started feeling better, too, thanks to overhealth from excess HP. By the time he removed the last point of Strength, the sense of his imminent demise had faded, replaced with anger at his own stupidity. He tried to sit up and failed utterly. His body instead did a pathetic sort-of twitch. It didn't look like he'd be moving for a while.

He sighed, closing his eyes.

Damn it. I pulled a Val.

"Dominus, the barrier remains unbroken," said Princeps-Magus Markus, commander of the first artillery contingent.

"Yes, I can see that. Your point?" the dominus said, a note of danger in his voice.

The princeps raised his head, looking at his scowling superior. "Requesting permission to intensify the barrage."

"Denied. Continue the rotations."

Markus looked back at his own artillery contingent. They were not due for another salvo for an hour under the current schedule. He shook his head, then glared at the dominus, his annoyance boiling over into anger. "Dominus, this is ridiculous! We can—"

"Enough!" screamed the dominus. "Leave me!"

"Perhaps if you would explain why..."

"Idiot!" the dominus roared. "If I need to explain it to you, perhaps you are undeserving of your rank. Fine! It is not like I can request a replacement; thus, I must enlighten you." He shook his head, continuing in a condescending tone. "What happens if the DKE sends a Citizen our way and the artillery is all out of mana? The archers out of stamina? The enhancers, spent? Will the infantry protect us on their own, once the barriers fail?"

Markus shook his head. *What happened to his confidence? He ordered Lightbreaker to lower the veil when we attacked, as was proper. But now he's had him put it back up while we sit here and bide our time...* "Dominus, if you allow me and the other princeps to attack with full force,

I am confident we can break through quickly. We would be able to bring in reinforcements from—”

“Quiet,” said the dominus, his tone cold. Markus closed his mouth. When Dominus Bekerim stopped yelling, that was when the real danger began. “I said no. Your detachment will assist Princeps-Praesidium Gavek with the fortifications for the rest of the day. You will explain to your mages why they are lifting rocks while their fellows bring down the barrier for the glory of the empire. Now, go.”

The princeps controlled his expression, slamming a fist to his chest. “Adamant Unbending.”

“Adamant Unbending,” Dominus Bekerim replied formally, then turned away to stare once more at the barrier.

The princeps forced himself to walk calmly back to his contingent. It was utterly ridiculous that the Adamant Army had been stalled like this, their surprise attack ruined. The dominus was hesitating. He was making them look weak. Weakness was unacceptable.

Princeps-Magus Markus was eagerly awaiting the assembly of the mindcaster. Once the bulky contraption was operational, the dominus would be forced to report his failure to the potentate. Then, they would have a new dominus. Then, the real assault could begin.

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
14,749	22,750	336,832

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
HP	200	200	380/d
SP	126	920	450/d
MP	4,827	5,662	1.3/s

Dark Revenant's Armor

	CUR	MAX	RGN
DUR	9,722	1,309	0
SAT	0	13,202	-92/s
CHG	0	14,209	0

Attributes

124/139	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	BUFF	SYN
STR	2.4	10	10	0/37	24%
RCV	7.38	38	10	28/8	41%
END	7.8	46	10	36/16	30%
VGR	10.4	45	10	35/16	40%
FCS	10	10	10	0/49	100%
CLR	225	225	200	25/61	100%

Resistances

0/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	4.6	0%
COLD	4.6	0%
LIGHT	4.6	0%
DARK	4.6	0%
FORCE	4.6	0%
ARCANE	4.6	0%
CHEMICAL	4.6	0%
MENTAL	4.6	0%

Rain rubbed at his eyes and sighed at the weakness that he still felt in his arms. The floating blue menu was all that he could see, lying in darkness as he was. It had been about an hour since he'd collapsed, and he'd used the time to remodel his menus, rather than risk injuring himself further by attempting to sit up.

Starting from the top, he'd managed to add two new fields, namely his level cap and his total experience. The cap was straightforward, but total experience was another story. After a bit of head-scratching, he'd realized that the system was including all of the experience that he'd spent unlocking skill trees. He'd confirmed it by unlocking the last eight remaining trees of the second tier. His current experience had dropped, but the total hadn't changed.

Unlocking the skill trees had been a calculated risk. From past experience, he was 99% sure that the different categories of soulstrain were independent. Working up the nerve to act on that theory had been the hard part. In the end, he hadn't felt the slightest strain, even after unlocking all eight trees in a row. He drew the line at trying for a tier-three, however. That was just asking for trouble. He'd do it eventually, but giving himself a few minutes to rest seemed like a good idea.

He'd tried to add pending experience to the display as well, but that had been a failure. No matter how hard he had struggled to define what he wanted, the system had outright refused to acknowledge him. He'd lost a full fifteen minutes on the project before he'd given up. The system was infuriatingly arbitrary about some things.

Moving on, he'd consolidated his vital statistics, even adding the state of his armor. It had been surprisingly easy to pull in the information from his inventory window. Oddly, the

hardest part had been getting his current health, mana, and stamina to display on the window. Sometimes, the system seemed like it was just being difficult out of spite.

Lastly, he'd condensed his adaptation panel so it would fit, then added his resistances as an afterthought. The only stats that were missing from his new display were his perception and movement speed, but those seldom changed. He could always just check his old window if he wanted to see them. Honestly, this new one was busy enough as it was.

In any event, he could now see his general condition at a glance, which was a definite improvement over the three different windows he'd had to check before. Reconfiguring the windows had been easy, for the most part. Now, it was time for something hard: sitting up.

Okay, here we go.

Slowly, Rain raised himself up onto his elbows, then pushed himself up until he was sitting. *Wow, not as bad as I expected. There's no pain, just weakness. Stamina soulstrain?* He took a deep breath, filling his lungs to the max, then let the air out slowly. There was no sign of the burning pain that had gripped them as he struggled for air. The ache in his bones had faded away as well.

Well then. That which does not kill you makes you stronger.

Strength Tolerance: 18 -> 37

Recovery Tolerance: 8 -> 8

Endurance Tolerance: 7 -> 16

Vigor Tolerance: 15 -> 16

General Tolerance: 133 -> 139

Strength and Endurance gained a lot, which makes sense. Recovery got nothing, and Vigor only got one point, which means that potion-and-ring shenanigans are a no-go as far as the secondary stats are concerned. It must only count natural regeneration. Damn. Still, with this kind of progress, people must do stuff like this for training all the time. Even if it doesn't work for the recovery stats, the results don't lie. I thought I was going to need five days to do all this, but here I am doing it in one.

Not feeling up to the task of standing quite yet, Rain crawled over to his pack and retrieved a ration bar. The rock-hard 'food' resisted his attempts to bite into it, and his jaw felt too tired to manage the pressure required to break it. He chuckled to himself. *So I starve to death because my food is too hard? I think not.*

He opened the settings for the ring and hesitantly started adding points into Strength. This time, he took points out of Clarity to compensate, not wanting to strain his general tolerance in the slightest. He tried taking another bite of the ration with 20 points invested. This time, he managed to crack off a piece and quickly shuffled it into his cheek to soften.

Much better.

Soulstrain was the strangest thing. The categories were indeed separate. If there was a 'general soulstrain,' he wasn't sure he'd ever pushed himself hard enough to feel it.

Right now, he was experiencing stamina overuse soulstrain, making him feel weak, and stamina recovery soulstrain, making him feel tired. Or perhaps 'Endurance soulstrain' and 'Vigor soulstrain' would be more appropriate names. He was starting to think that there was one for each stat, rather than one for each resource pool.

He wasn't sure he'd ever experienced Strength soulstrain. He wasn't feeling any pain at the moment, despite the ridiculous training and the extent to which he'd pushed past his tolerance. As for why not, he was guessing that it was because he hadn't actually lost that much health. The notable incident in that regard was when he'd fallen off of a cliff, but even then, he'd only had the single health pool to lose. If that had been enough to cause Strength soulstrain, he hadn't been conscious to experience its effects. Instead, Ameliah had healed him to within an inch of his life. That was Recovery soulstrain. It hadn't been pain; it had been sensitivity. Even the breeze had been uncomfortable when he was in that state. He felt none of that now.

Focus caused headaches, he was sure. Jamus complained of something called 'mana starvation,' saying it wasn't exactly the same thing as mana use soulstrain. Rain was still unsure if Jamus had been right about that. It was certainly possible. There was no reason there *couldn't* be more than one type of soulstrain per stat.

In his mind, it all had to do with stat ratios, combined with synchronization and tolerance. Because Rain's Focus was pathetic, it had been trivial for him to get to 100% synchronization. Jamus, on the other hand, had high Focus and low Clarity. It would have been tough for him to use enough mana to do any real training. Rain's guess was that a mage like Jamus would get a headache whenever they used more mana than they had earned according to their synchronization. They would then stop, making it even harder to make progress. Lots of mages probably had that issue. He'd also heard that high focus made a person's mana more turbulent, exacerbating the problem.

Clarity soulstrain seemed to have two manifestations as well. Val and Jamus had complained of feeling sick from too much Essence Well, but Rain also had the example of when he'd driven himself bonkers. That had happened when he'd pushed himself way past his Clarity tolerance and used a bunch of Winter Novas. The two were distinctly separate effects.

Then, there were the weird ones. Experience overuse soulstrain made him nauseous, stat boost soulstrain replaced his bone marrow with lava, and too much Detection turned him into a synesthetic mess. That last one might not be soulstrain at all, but he didn't have anything else to call it. It might be that there were so many flavors of soulstrain that trying to classify them all was a life's work.

The bottom line here was that they were separate. That was important. It meant that he could keep going.

I'm not a warrior, and I never will be. Strength might get me out of here, but it's my magic that I need to strengthen. And my soul. There is something hidden there, I know it. It's got to do with that total experience number, maybe other things as well. Thanks to my rare class and ridiculous mana regen, I'm stronger than people expect me to be.

He nodded to himself in the darkness. *There's something going on with souls for sure. Exhibit A: The Watch has trouble using their lie-detection hoodoo on me. Exhibit B: Velika brute-forced her way into a lair. I don't see any skill that would let you do that; it has to be just her overall power. Fuck, she's terrifying.*

He shook his head. *Soul strength matters. I need to keep going. It's time to find out if 'training overview soulstrain' is a thing.*

Rain deactivated Winter completely, then concentrated, forcing the system to move his training dialog up from 6 AM tomorrow to right-the-hell-now.

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Health Use: 54

Stamina Use: 346

Mana Use: 7,466

Skill Experience Earned

Mana Manipulation: 92

Aura Compression: 214

He smiled in the darkness. Nudging the dialog forward or backward an hour or two was one thing; this was something else entirely.

Nice. It's been around six hours, and I haven't used much mana, but that's proof positive that I can do this more than once in a day without injuring myself. As for how many times, I feel like I'm gonna find out.

He smiled, resisting the urge to reactivate Winter. He'd gotten used to the constant chill and felt strange without it, but he'd deactivated it for a purpose. If he could summon his training overview on command, he could abuse it to mine information from the system. Right now, he had no mana use recorded. His next dialog should only show the result of his planned experiment, with no contamination from his baseline usage.

It was time to figure out what the deal was with Aura Compression and Essence Well. He pulled up the skill card for Essence Well, then activated it at 15% power, the maximum level at which the efficiency would remain at 100%.

Essence Well (10/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 0 mp/s

Efficiency: 100%

Range: 18 meters

IFF was set to exclude himself from the spell, and there were no other targets in range, so the usage showed as zero. He'd been expecting that. The blue rings of light that signaled the skill was active didn't even appear. He also opened his character window to monitor his experience, seeing that it was currently sitting at 22,615/22,750, with a total of 344,698.

As expected, nothing was changing. He wasn't spending mana, and it wouldn't have shown up anyway, even if he had been. Still maintaining Essence Well, he concentrated, pulling his training overview forward once more.

Training Overview

Also as expected, the dialog was utterly blank. It also confirmed that he could summon it freely, as he had yet to feel any ill-effects. If there was some limit, he wasn't near it. That meant it was time for science.

Hypothesis: Essence Well is Bullshit.

Rain accessed his IFF settings and removed himself from the list. Immediately, the azure rings that indicated the spell was active appeared around him. The rings cast no light into the room, not even allowing him to see himself. They were just like his menus in that regard. It was interesting, but not really important at the moment. He turned his attention to the skill card, counting the seconds in his head.

Essence Well (10/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 2.7 mp/s

Efficiency: 100%

Range: 18 meters

After ten seconds, he canceled it, then pulled his training dialog forward again.

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Mana Use: 40

Hypothesis confirmed. Essence Well is bullshit. It doesn't even cost mana because it's giving it all back, and yet, 40 experience. How is that even fair? You can't get something for nothing... Also, what the hell? Shouldn't it be 13.5? Ten seconds at 2.7 per second should have 'cost' 27 mana. The experience gain for auras is 50%, so why...? Something to do with Channel Mastery?

Rain deactivated Channel Mastery, then did a quick 1-second pulse of Essence Well with no modifiers whatsoever, making sure to catch the number displayed on the skill card.

Essence Well (10/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 18 mp/s

Efficiency: 20%

Range: 18 meters

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Mana Use: 45

Mana use should have been 18 times five, so 90. 90 by 2 is 45. That all checks out. So the first time, Essence Well gave me 13.5, and Channel Mastery gave me the rest, so 26.5 experience. Why?

Rain ran a hand through his unkempt hair and sighed.

Okay, let me try something less screwy than Essence Well. The efficiency thing is making this harder than it needs to be. Before that, though, I need to spend some experience so I don't hit the cap. Tier-three time...

Rain worked up his courage, then unlocked the third tier of Arcane Mysteries. He didn't even look at the skills that were revealed. There would be plenty of time for that later, and he didn't want to get distracted. To his relief, the skill tree unlock was painless, only a slight sense of exertion to show that he'd done anything at all.

Wow, I really am getting stronger. Anyway, my experience is now 12,700/22,750, with 344,783 total. Should be plenty to play with. Let's try 10 seconds of Purify with Channel Mastery restricting it to 90% power.

Purify (10/10)
Purify poison, corruption, and contamination
Range: 18 meters
Cost: 90 mp/min

Training Overview
General Experience Earned
Mana Use: 8

Damn it, system, can I get some more digits? He concentrated, feeling nothing. What, no? Why the hell not? Please? Oh come on!

Rain sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "Sometimes, I don't even know why I bother." His words echoed hollowly in the room, then he took a deep breath and shouted. "HEY! SOMEONE GET ME OUT OF HERE! I'M DOING MATH, AND IT IS DRIVING ME INSANE!"

Unsurprisingly, there was no response. He couldn't even hear the bells that typically signaled the hour, the blockage in the passage sealing him off from the surface completely. Silence returned, and he sighed. *Damn it. Nobody is coming. At this point, I'm like 90% sure that Velika left me here on purpose, and sealed me in besides. She can't think I had anything to do with the Watch's plan, right?*

He shook his head. Speculation wasn't productive.

He tried again, this time using Velocity for the higher mana cost. He kept Channel Mastery at the same level. He left the spell running for longer, a full minute, making sure to stay very, very still while he counted. Moving when his every motion was enhanced to a ridiculous degree would be an awful idea in his current condition.

Velocity (10/10)
162% boost to speed for all entities
Range: 18 meters
Cost: 9 mp/s

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Mana Use: 330

Okay, so 9 times 60 is 540 mana. Divide by 2 is 270. I got 330, so that's 60 for Channel Mastery. Now, why is that?

Rain scratched at his stubbly chin as he thought.

Humm. Everything divides by 10, so that makes it a bit easier. Simplifying to 6 seconds, Velocity used 54 mana and earned 27. Channel Mastery earned 6. Does anything else divide nicely? 54 by 6 is 9... Does that mean anything? Wait, it might, Channel Mastery is at 90%. Let's try 80%.

Velocity (10/10)
144% boost to speed for all entities
Range: 18 meters
Cost: 8 mp/s

Training Overview

General Experience Earned
Mana Use: 360

WHAT!!!!???? If there'd been any light in the room, an observer would have been able to see visible frustration on Rain's face.

How the hell is it more if I spent less mana!? Sixty seconds is 480 mana from Velocity. That should have been 240 experience, meaning Channel Mastery got 120 experience. WHY? 240 by 120 is 2, but...no, that has to be just a coincidence. Damn it!

Rain had to stop himself from pulling at his hair. He was getting even further off track from his original question. With a deep breath, he forced himself to just let it go. It wasn't important. He needed a practical answer, not a theoretical one.

What is the fastest way to abuse this crap to train Aura Compression?

Test: Essence Well. 15% power. Maximum Compression. Ten seconds. Go.

Essence Well (10/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 3.2832 mp/s

Efficiency: 100%

Range: 0 meters

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Mana Use: 82

Skill Experience Earned

Aura Compression: 34

3.4 experience a second for the skill and 8.2 per second in general, coming out of fucking nowhere. Sure! Fine! Great!

Rain ran his hands through his hair in exasperation.

Screw it, how about a Singularity. Extend Aura, Aura Focus, and Aura Compression. No Amplify Aura and with Channel Mastery at 1% so the efficiency doesn't go to shit. If this creates a black hole, I am going to be SO pissed.

The skill card appeared, and Rain tweaked it to reflect his true feelings on the matter.

Essence Singularity (composite)

WHAT THE \$%#@#!?

Transfer Rate: 1.23984 mp/s

Efficiency: 100%

He held it for ten seconds, then immediately called up his training dialog as his senses returned.

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Mana Use: 126

Skill Experience Earned

Aura Compression: 32

“Well then...” he said aloud, almost relieved. “I didn’t break the universe completely, only a little bit.”

The amount of skill experience had gone down, but the general experience had gone up. He was in no mood to try and figure out why. He tried a few more combinations of settings, but couldn’t find a way to break it any further. Even increasing the intensity from 1% to 2% made the efficiency start falling off. Holding Channel Mastery between percentage points was difficult, basically not worth the effort for a marginal gain. Ultimately, he settled on his original settings: 15% Channel Mastery and 18 meters of compression, nothing else. He didn’t want to be without senses in the event that someone actually came to rescue him.

Essence Well (10/10)

Transfer mana to all entities within range, including user

Transfer Rate: 3.2832 mp/s

Efficiency: 100%

Range: 0 meters

He watched the blue ring rising around himself with an unhappy expression on his face.

I don't like this. I don't like this at all. This is free energy, and it is fricking impossible. 8.2 general experience a second for doing nothing. I spend the mana, then the mana comes back, then I spend it again. On and on it goes. It makes no damn sense. How long can I keep this up? Will anything bad happen if I do? Is this going to tear a hole in the fabric of the space-time continuum?

He sighed, rubbing at his eyes.

Maybe I'm thinking about this wrong. I AM using mana, even if I'm just getting it back. The mana isn't doing anything. It's just moving around. But what is doing the moving? Where does the energy for THAT come from? My soul, right?

He lay back on the ground and closed his eyes, shaking his head slowly. The stone felt hard and cold against the back of his skull.

Mana is energy and spells use it to do stuff. Mana is generated by the soul...somehow. It depends on how much Clarity you have, plus other things like Dynamo. Health and Stamina must be the same. They have to come from somewhere. The soul? Maybe mana is just one specific kind of...soul energy?

When I use Essence Well like this, I'm not spending mana, per se, just moving it. Right...

So let's say that the thing that is doing the moving is my soul, and it is using some other kind of energy to do it. That's where the experience is coming from. The real question is: can I run out of that secret energy? Is that what soulstrain is? He sighed. I am so confused.

...Wait.

Essence Well.

He sat up suddenly, fatigue pushed aside. *Essence! It's in the name! Essence is the secret energy! 'Blue' is just slang; the real name is 'Essence Monster!' You become an awakened by*

defeating one and absorbing its Essence! That lets you use magic and the system and whatever else!

Rain smiled, then started to laugh.

Or I'm completely wrong, and this is what going insane feels like.

He kept laughing in the darkness as the glowing azure rings of energy rose around him, slowly but surely bolstering the power of his soul.

After a minute, his laughter began to fade, then stopped altogether, returning the room to silence.

It was the silence of a tomb.

His mind traveled unwillingly to the corpses waiting for him on the other side of the wall. If he couldn't find a way to get out and no one came for him, he'd be joining them. It would be a slow, agonizing death by starvation.

He had to get out.

He had to.