

A short while later, John and Aeolia stood at the back door of John's house. The AvenFae had returned to her natural size and was perched on John's shoulder, taloned feet comfortably resting on the soft wool of John's coat.

"You ready?" Aeolia asked, noting that John was fidgeting with his ring.

"Yeah," John replied, forcing himself to stop playing with his accessory. His nerves still high, John ran over his equipment to calm his mind.

"Coat, ring, amulet, goggles, knife," John internally recited his gear. *"I've still got the Mana Crystal for extra mana in case we need it."*

John took a deep breath and focused his mind. "Alright, let's go."

With determined steps, John strode out into his backyard. The grassy plot was well maintained, the lingering scent of recently cut grass proof that the hired lawn care business had done their job. John cast his eyes over to his neighbors' homes, checking to see if anyone was watching from the windows.

"Looks like the coast is clear," John reported.

"Great," Aeolia said. "Pop open a Barrier and let's get a move on."

John was ready to trigger **Instant Barrier** but paused as an errant thought crossed his mind, drawing his mouth into a frown.

"What's the hold-up?" Aeolia asked, noting the less than enthusiastic look on his face.

"Back when we were attacked," John answered, "the experience I got was cut because you weren't in my party. And there's no way to know what other things might get messed up by you not being in it now, so..."

"I get it," Aeolia said, "no need to go and make this some long-winded request. Shoot me that invite."

John nodded and sent the request; this time Aeolia clicked "Yes".

Aeolia has joined the Gamer Test Party.

**Achievement Unlocked: Form Up.

Form a party with someone. Good on you, making friends. Don't go and get them killed now. 3 Novice's Health Potions added.**

"Well, those'll be useful," Aeolia commented before John could close the popup.

"You can see that?" John asked, turning his head to look at his passenger. Above her, joining the floating display of her name and level, was a set of twinned bars, one red, one blue.

"Yeah," she replied, her eyes drifting up to a point above John's head. "You've got stuff floating above your head. I'm guessing those bars are your health and mana."

"They are," John said, noting that Aeolia's health bar was between half and three-quarters full. He opened his Inventory and withdrew one of the potions, the glass bottle fitting comfortably in his palm.

![[potion]](https://images2.imgbox.com/2f/5e/rEdSnFfV_o.png)

"I think you should take one of these," John suggested. "You've got less than seventy-five percent of your health. This will restore twenty-five points of damage. For me, that would give me back nearly half, so hopefully, it'll put you over seventy-five."

"I'll take it," Aeolia said, "but after we get into the Barrier. Probably not a good idea to try to chug that at this size or grow up and risk getting seen."

"Good idea," John replied, "I'll keep it ready just in case we get mobbed right away."

All preparation set, John raised his hand and cast ****Instant Barrier****. Instead of being pulled into a Barrier like before, a menu screen manifested before them.

"Now that's unfair," Aeolia grumbled as she read the display, "most of us have to force a Barrier to do something. You get options."

"If it's any consolation," John retorted, "I had to spend eighteen years without powers. Just plain and nerdy me."

John's focus returned to the manifested menu, missing the slight grimace that crossed over Aeolia's face. "Let's see what we've got here. 'Protected Space' will make a non-hostile Barrier with nothing in it, guess that's like what you guys have for your base, 'Dungeon' makes a quest-based Barrier where we'll have to complete that to win, and 'Illusion Barrier' makes an area that will spawn a number of enemies we'll have to beat in order to leave. So, what do you think, Dungeon or Illusion Barrier?"

"Illusion Barrier sounds the closest to what I've normally used," Aeolia said. "The dungeon one sounds like it might take more time, and you don't want to freak your mom out, right?"

"Yeah," John intoned as he nodded, finger hovering about the 'Illusion Barrier' option, "that sounds like the best bet."

John clicked the agreed-upon choice, and the world lurched under John's feet. Familiar now with the sensation of entering and exiting a Barrier, John was able to keep his footing as the neatly cut grass suddenly became an overgrown clearing and the houses vanished, replaced by towering trees.

****Barrier entered. Type: Forest. Average Enemy level: 10. Defeat all enemies to clear the Barrier.****

"Well, I'm a bit under levelled," John said as Aeolia hopped off his shoulder and shifted to her tall form, her mana bar dipping slightly. John tossed her the health potion and she quickly downed it, her health bar shooting up to about the seventy-five percent mark.

Once she was finished, John continued, "Looks like the Barrier took our Party's average level and set the Barrier's level to that. I don't know how useful I'm going to be here. Sorry."

Aeolia regarded the surroundings for a second then turned her attention back to John. "What level were those hounds that attacked us? Figure they could set a baseline for what you can do against them."

"I only used ****Observe**** on the Alpha and he was level seven," John recounted. "Since it was called the Alpha, I can only guess that it was a higher level."

"That sounds about right," Aeolia said, adopting a pensive posture. "If I had been in top shape, I think I could have handled them well enough. The ones that attacked us before were a lot more powerful looking."

She paused, banishing away that harsh memory, and continued, "Anyway, I think that I should be able to handle something level ten, assuming I don't get too badly ganged up on. What level am I anyway?"

"Sixteen," John readily answered, a note of bitterness in his voice, "and I'm at four."

"Hey, you gotta start somewhere," Aeolia chimed in. "And the important part is you're trying to get stronger, right?"

"Yeah," John said, his tone still a little resigned. He shook his head, goggles shifting slightly. "Well, no point in just standing around. Let's see if we can't find anything to fight."

"Sounds like a plan," Aeolia responded, before smirking. "Do we head for the trees, or the trees?"

John didn't get the chance to answer or laugh at her little jest as Aeolia dashed sideways, grabbing John as she moved. A second later, an object landed with a dull thud. John whipped his head towards it; a stone the size of his fist had left a dent in the grass.

John fumbled a second and drew his goggles down over his eyes, willing the aura vision active. The forest sparked to life, motes of magenta swirling around every plant, with one outlier. What John may have mistaken for a lumpy growth near the base of one of the trees was aglow with streams of that energy, defining a stout form with oddly long limbs. John quickly cast ****Observe**** on their first enemy.

! [Woadscout] (https://images2.imgbox.com/88/0e/xpEs6aa3_o.png)

"Level six," John said, half to himself and half to inform Aeolia of the creature's relative threat level. He willed the aura vision off and drew his knife. The Scout saw that its targets were aware of its position so it quickly spun its sling and loosed another rock, this time aimed squarely at John.

Before John could try to dodge, Aeolia let out a cry as she swung her glaive, the blade alight with green magic, the same shade as her aura. Her arc released a wave of green-tinted wind that cut through the air and impacted the slung stone, deflecting it.

The Woad evidently knew when it was time to retreat and tried to move to another position, stick-like fingers and root-like feet effortlessly allowing it to scale up a tree.

"No, you don't!" Aeolia snarled, drawing her weapon back over her shoulder. She fired a sickle of verdant wind at the climbing Woad. It lurched around the tree to avoid the attack, swinging like an orangutan, but wasn't agile enough to avoid a glancing blow. The wind carved through its extended left leg, the sound of splitting wood drowned out by an odd humming that seemed to come from the Woad's chest cavity.

****10DMG****

"I get damage alerts," John said incredulously as he and Aeolia dashed towards the treeline. "Didn't get them before."

Aeolia didn't respond to John's commentary, her focus wholly on the still climbing Woad. She tensed her legs and jumped, her wings flapping as she took to the air, racing the Woad upwards. With its injured leg, the Scout wasn't able to clamber into the branches before Aeolia caught up to it. She quickly swung her glaive, blade alight with magically charged wind.

In a surprising move, the Woad let go of the tree, avoiding Aeolia's tree rending strike and sliding down the trunk under a shower of splinters. As it travelled down the tree like a fireman's

pole, it spun around, putting its back to the expanse of trees. It kicked the tree with its good leg and launched itself towards the nearest tree. With only one leg to work with, its manoeuvre wasn't enough to make it to the next tree, and it landed hard upon the root torn ground.

****3DMG****

Hobbled as it was, the Scout wasn't able to reach a new tree before John got in range.

"Let's see how you like this," John shouted, spending thirty-six Mana to cast the Goggles' ****Photonic Blast****.

John's vision dimmed as the lenses tinted before a pulse of white light shot from the Goggles to the center of the Woad's back, as fast as a strike of lightning.

****46DMG. Super Effective.****

The Woad's odd hollow humming voice seemed to cry in agony and the scent of charred wood filled John's nose as his vision returned to normal, letting him see the burnt wood that ran nearly the total length of the Scout's back. The blast seemed to have taken the wind out of the Woad's sails, its movements sluggish as it tried to turn to attack John, waving its arm like a club.

John jumped back from the attack, evading the closed wooden fist. While the Woad was off-balanced, John swung his knife into the wooden creature, the sharp blade finding purchase at the point where its arm sprouted from its stumpy torso.

****4DMG****

The strike tore into the Woad's wooden body, sending splinters flying into the air. John wrenched his weapon free from the wound as the Woad let out another resonating cry. It pivoted, trying to strike John with a backswing, but its damaged shoulder made its movements even slower and seemed to prevent the full extension of the limb.

John drew back slightly and, when the Woad's torso was fully exposed, lunged, putting his whole weight into his strike. He struck dead center.

****20DMG. Critical Hit****

The blade sunk into the Woad's chest, eliciting a brief rattling sound, before John's momentum brought the lifeless husk down to the ground with him on top of it.

****99 Exp. Gained****

![[Sblade]](https://images2.imgbox.com/fd/2c/LHNnIAWJ_o.png)

****Skill Level Up: Evocation Lv. 2****

John scrambled to his feet as the Woad flashed out of existence. He closed the popup for ****Evocation**** and the experience notification faded on its own. He ignored the new skill and the two items that were left after the Woad vanished and instead focused on his breathing.

"Nice work," Aeolia said as she descended from above. "You didn't mention those goggles could fire a laser. Looks like it packs a punch."

"Takes a lot of mana to use too," John replied, his breath steady. "Thirty-five to cast, and takes a fifth of the Goggles' durability, so unless I can repair it on the fly, I can only use four shots without risking them breaking on me, assuming they're at full durability."

"Still, looks like it's really effective on these guys," Aeolia remarked. "How much damage did it compared to our other hits?"

"I did forty-six with the Goggles, four with the first knife hit and a critical hit for twenty with the last one. I think you did ten when you hit its leg and it took a little damage when it hit the ground," John recounted, "which puts it at about eighty health at most."

"So your attack did over half to it," Aeolia murmured, mulling over the tactical implications. "We should probably keep the remaining uses of it for emergencies."

"Good idea," John agreed, "Don't really know how the damage is calculated. But my powers said it was a super effective hit, which usually means it got a multiplier. Need more info to get a good read on it. And I think their chest cavity is their weak spot. A clean stab from your glaive should do a lot more damage than my knife."

"Sounds like a plan," Aeolia said, nodding in agreement. "We can take a short break to recover a bit of Mana and you can sort through that loot."

"Got it," John said, turning his attention to the two items that lay where the Woad Scout had fallen, while Aeolia began to walk a short perimeter, keeping her eyes open for any threats. One item was a simple-looking rock coated in moss, and the other was an overly long wooden limb, stick-like fingers splayed out. John cast ****Observe**** on both, then placed them in his Inventory.

"Okay, let's go in rarity order," John said, focusing on the Mossy Rock's sheet.

![Rock](https://images2.imgbox.com/e6/09/MDsYa6mo_o.png)

****Air-Sliding:** This object passes seamlessly through the air, letting it fly further despite its shape.

“Well, if I had the sling drop too, that might have made a decent weapon option,” John griped as he closed the Attribute page, “at least the ****Evocation**** looks interesting.”

![Grav](https://images2.imgbox.com/bc/8f/65zNloGl_o.png)

“Now that’s something,” John said. “That can get crazy once I up my Agility and ****Evocation****. Hell, right now a fifteen percent reduction for ten seconds could mean being able to get out of the way of an attack.”

He put aside other ideas for the rock’s ****Evocation**** and moved on to the other piece of loot.

![Limb](https://images2.imgbox.com/cb/4a/auCOFFCh_o.png)

“Already know what Earthen Reinforced does,” John commented before frowning. “Did the Scout have that Attribute? I don’t think my knife had any issue cutting it. I don’t think the rocks fired at us had any moss on them either. Guess it’s like an enemy not using a weapon or armor even when they drop them.”

Moving on from that tangent, John clicked the unknown Attribute.

****Innate Enhancement:** Other Attributes have their properties increased by 15%.

“Yeah, don’t think that guy had these bonuses,” John asserted as he closed the display. “Okay, let’s see what this Gift of the Forest does.”

![Forest](https://images2.imgbox.com/99/f1/CSrxJFAx_o.png)

“A buffing and healing effect,” John said with a grin, “nice. Not as great as an immediate flat heal, but better than nothing. I wonder how often it ticks, like once a second or once a minute? Can’t say I look forward to finding out.”

Dismissing all the displays, John stretched a bit as Aeolia drew closer, evidently done with her impromptu patrol.

“Anything useful?” she quipped inquisitively. “And don’t leave any details out.”

John filled her in on what the drops were and what they did.

“You better keep that healing one ready to use,” Aeolia said seriously and John didn’t need to question why she felt so strongly about that.

"If what shows up later hits harder than the Scout, I'll play cleric," John said with what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Any idea which way we should go?"

Aeolia pointed to the tree the Woad had used as cover. "Since our first enemy was hiding behind this tree, our best bet would be to head deeper into the woods away from it. Hopefully, they won't expect an attack and we can ambush them."

"Sounds like a plan."