

After dropping Ella off not too far from the rift, I used World Walker to take the rest of us back to the outskirts of Fallcry. Since I couldn't put the giant cannon in my inventory, I had no choice but to set it down outside the city's walls and call for Hammerhead. When I told him that I had been given an advanced runic weapon created by a civilization specialized in the subject, he came running surprisingly fast for his stature.

His eyes widened at the sight of the cannon, hands tracing over it. "This thing's a beaut. Don't suppose you have any idea how it works? Would hate to break it while disassembling it."

Having shrunk back to my normal form, I shook my head. "I can tell you what it does, but I'm not skilled enough with runes to tell you how it does it, even if I can see inside the thing. This cannon sends its target directly into the spirit realm, in the most literal sense. It doesn't kill them, but if they don't have a way to get back on their own, that could be considered even worse."

Hammerhead's eyes widened at this, looking back at me for confirmation. "That so? That sounds like a highly advanced runic script. I'll be completely honest, I'm not even sure if I'd recognize the runes if they were right in front of me."

"Thankfully, I have this for that," I said, before pulling out the 'Big Book of Runes' and handing it over. "According to the people that I got this from, this is a detailed guide to runes, and has been updated for the recent patch."

Hammerhead quickly took the book from my hands, opening it up to read it. However, as soon as he saw the first page, his expression stiffened. "Hey, Drake, are you sure that you didn't get scammed?"

"Why?" I asked, eyes narrowing as he showed me the page. The front page appeared as if it were covered with static, densely packed black and white specks that seemed to shift constantly as the page moved.

It took me a moment to understand what I was looking at, and I let out a sigh. "It's not a scam... do you have a magnifying glass?"

"What? Don't tell me, there's no way they wrote it that small," he complained, grabbing a monocle from his inventory and putting it on to look at the page again. "Good lords, man. Did you get this book from a race of ants or something!?"

"Pixies, actually," I shook my head with a wry smile, using my own vision-enhancing skills to look more closely at the page. It wasn't static that I was seeing. Instead, it was densely packed writing, with each rune being roughly half a millimeter in size. "If it makes you feel better, the runes inside the cannon are significantly larger."

"I'd hope so," Hammerhead grunted. "The size of a rune largely correlates to its power. If you write a script this tiny, you'd be lucky to get so much as a spark." After saying that, he looked

back at me. "I've got to go back to the workshop and study this book for a while. Until I understand the logic behind how the cannon was built, I don't want to risk taking it apart. In the meantime, can you make a storage area for it? Preferably underground, so nobody gets any ideas."

I readily agreed, lowering the cannon down into a hollowed cube, before completely sealing it off. After telling Hammerhead to inform me when he was ready to study the device, we went into the city and split up. Diane wanted to go meet Ennolf to let him know about the trade deal, and I wanted to take a moment to plan our next move.

Thus, Bella and I went to the palace, sitting in one of the conference rooms. "It'd be best to have this discussion with Diane present, but we'll bring her up to speed when she's free," I began, looking at Bella. "What are you wanting to do next? A lot of the improvements we've gotten lately have been tailored to Diane, and I want to make sure that you're getting plenty for yourself, as well."

Bella blinked in surprise, but then lowered her head thoughtfully. "Honestly, I'm not sure. I don't know where the gap in my skills is at the moment, given the abilities I've already gotten."

"In that case, why don't we ask an expert?" I suggested, and Bella lifted her head to look at me. "Despite how brutal her training is, Kelly is great at figuring out how to help people improve themselves. Alternatively, we could get advice from Wisteria if she's free."

"Which would you suggest?" Bella asked uncertainly, looking at me for my opinion.

"Personally, I'd prefer asking Kelly. However, there is one small problem with her... she isn't aware of your trait yet. And given her abilities, she would find out immediately as soon as she started to seriously train you."

Bella's eyes widened at my words. Until now, we had been doing our best to limit how many people knew about her trait, given just how popular it was. Furthermore, it was far more likely to drop than my own, making it extremely dangerous for us to just let anyone know about it.

So far, we had openly told Wisteria because we needed to get Bella recruited into the League of Assassins. Marron had found out on her own, but had immediately signed a nondisclosure agreement. Kelly, on the other hand, had yet to be informed.

Given her personality, I doubted that Kelly would covet the Offline Leveling trait. Still, I had to play it safe, given that Bella's safety was involved.

Bella bit her bottom lip gently, her head lowered. "I'd like to ask Wisteria first, if that's alright."

I nodded my head in understanding, pulling up my friends list to type out a message to Wisteria. *Would it be alright if we had you take a look at Bella? She doesn't know what direction she should focus on to develop her skills, and there aren't many people that we can consult.*

Bella and I both waited for the response, which only came about ten minutes later. *I've got something going on right now, but I can be there tomorrow to take a look.*

I repeated the response for Bella, who looked relieved. Although we had to wait a day, that was nothing too bad for us. As long as we weren't stuck in the middle of some dungeon or mission that wouldn't let us leave, there was no reason that we wouldn't be able to take some time to have Bella train with Wisteria.

As we were discussing that, the door to the conference room opened up, and Diane stepped in. "Nuoda said that you guys were in here chatting?" she asked, and we quickly filled her in on what we had been talking about.

Diane took a moment to think it over, nodding her head in agreement. "That sounds good to me. Honestly, the only thing I'm worried about finding at this point are high level ninja-themed dungeons. Once I can expand my personal dungeon, it'll practically run itself."

"Do you need me to look for those dungeons with my sponsorship points?" I asked, but Diane immediately shook her head to deny the help.

"That's fine. I'm watching out for them on the forums. I put out a bounty for players. Anyone that finds an elemental-themed ninja dungeon around level three hundred will get one piece of soulbound equipment of their choice, as long as it's not one that's already been reported to me. Two if it's an element not available in my dungeon yet."

I let out a low whistle, already imagining how many people would be eager to take that deal. "How long do you expect it to take to get a response?" I asked, and she simply smiled.

"I've already got two people lined up. One's supposedly a fire ninja dungeon, and the other a lightning ninja. I just had to put off going to check them out until we were done with the Yatagarasu incident."

"Do you want to take care of those while we wait for Wisteria to be free?" Bella asked, and Diane looked at the time.

"Hmm... I don't think we can do that today," she said with a shrug. "Both dungeons are pretty far away from anywhere we've been before. By the time we actually made it to one of them, I wouldn't have the time left to actually run the dungeon. Let's head there tomorrow, after you've done your training evaluation."

Bella and I both agreed, and we settled in for the night. Without anything going on, I did my first serious bout of training in a while, even using the simulated training to practice my less commonly used skills.

The next day, we received a message from Wisteria, telling us that she would show up after noon for the training. She wanted us to prepare a location for the training that would ensure that we were not observed, just to make certain that nobody found out about Bella's trait by accident.

Hearing that, we decided to go ahead and start making our way towards the lightning ninja dungeon, which was located in Stormforge, a realm that we had only visited briefly once. Thus, it would take a considerable amount of flying to reach our destination. And since the visibility in Stormforge was notoriously low, I couldn't just teleport around and hope that we found the place by relying on landmarks.

Thus, we got in the car, teleporting to Stormforge's rift. When we arrived, there was a fierce battle underway between the defenders of the rift and demons from Abyssis pouring through the gate. I looked back at them, realizing that this must have been another routine attack from the demons' side. I just rarely saw these because I often didn't visit a rift when it was connected to Abyssis.

Still, we flew through the sky, wrapped in a thick barrier to protect us against the constant lightning strikes that shout down against the iron ground. I had no intention of having the car destroyed by lightning, not when we spent so much time using it. If anything was going to destroy this car, it was naturally going to be me pushing it to its limits.

Three hours into our flight, I noticed that it was drawing close to noon, so I lowered the car to the ground and began to prepare. The monsters of Stormforge were largely metallic in nature, and often had high resistance to electricity. After confirming their levels to be in a safe range, I tasked Diane and Bella with clearing them out while I constructed a large house.

In addition to the house, I made three towers of iron nearby to act as lightning rods, and then set up the stealth barrier around the entire house.

By the time Wisteria arrived, everything had already been prepared, and there was a large training area set up behind the house, in between the three lightning towers. Wisteria looked around, seeming impressed as she recovered from her teleportation. "This'll do nicely to test her abilities," she said in an approving tone. "I might not be an expert with firearms, but I've had more than my fair share of fights. Let's see what she can do."