

119: Worry

Immolate!

```
stdout.sh: if you can't see this message, dialog spawning didn't work
focusboost.sh: trigger detected: oaura_active
focusboost.sh: f_start is 30
focusboost.sh: c_start is 53
focusboost.sh: f_tol is 70
focusboost.sh: c_tol is 144
focusboost.sh: got here
focusboost.sh: shifting 40 points from Clarity to Focus
focusboost.sh: Focus: 80 Clarity: 213
focusboost.sh: got here
focusboost.sh: mods detected: ['aura iff']
```

Immolate (10/10)

176-202 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment
Sufficient damage causes ignition
Range: 18 meters
Cost: 50 mp/s

Rain ignored the dialog that spawned as he activated the skill. The undead villagers—ghosts, zombies, Memories, whatever you wanted to call them—were less ‘Night of the Living Dead’ and more ‘Twenty-Eight Days Later’ in terms of their approach. The temperature rose as red light shined from his armor, his cloak billowing slightly from the heating air. He wasn’t using any boosts out of fear for his allies, but neither was he holding back. The lack of ambient Heat mana made the spell spread slowly, but his own mana would be enough to get the job done, given enough time.

Time that his allies would buy him.

"Block the door!" Carten shouted as he fell into a wide squat. He slammed his shields into the ground facing forward, building a wall of flesh and steel. There was a screech of ice on metal as the blade of the lead Memory skittered across his armor. More were right behind it, too many to count. Hundreds. Carten grunted as the tide of dead bodies crashed into him, but they might as well have tried to move a mountain. He didn't slide back so much as a single centimeter.

The first kill was claimed by Samson. He'd slipped to Carten's left, and in the same motion effortlessly beheaded one of the dead villagers with a slash that left a trail of white light in its wake. Samson had eschewed the wooden shield he'd been issued, preferring the two-handed style that he knew. The lack didn't appear to be hindering him, his sword rising smoothly to deflect a strike meant for his neck.

"Ahhhh!" Lyn yelled, her spear a blur as she fought to fend off the monsters on Carten's other side. She was using it more like a staff, thumping the monsters to push them back. The Memories, Rain realized to his horror, were *awake*. They were screaming in anguish, frozen tears in their eyes. Rain watched as one of them dodged back from Lyn's spear, the tip scratching a line into its icy armor.

"Kill meeee!" it yelled in a voice that sounded like the wind, its blades slashing for her neck. Lyn couldn't respond. She was busy trying to wrest her spear away from another Memory that had grabbed the haft. Rain jerked forward, knowing as he did that he would be far too late to save her. Fortunately, he wasn't the only one to see the danger. An Arcane Bolt took the Memory right in the face, Jamus's magic detonating its head in a fountain of gore.

"Ha!" Mlem shouted, his scimitar freeing Lyn's spear by severing the arm of the Memory holding it. He moved up beside her, plugging the last hole in their defense. With the four front-liners in place, the entrance to the mill was effectively blocked.

Val and Jamus set to work, Arcane and Light magic tearing into the horde. For all that Val's magic wasn't as destructive as Jamus's, it was no less effective in getting the Memories to flinch back. The press of bodies was overwhelming, with those that fell being quickly trampled by those behind.

"Oh gods..." Tahir said, his voice trembling. He stepped up beside Rain, sending an arrow flying over Carten's head and into the face of one of the Memories trying to climb over the big man. The Memory jerked back; then its head pivoted to stare at the archer, the shaft of the arrow sticking from its skull above its eye. It—no— *she* screamed at Tahir in terror as she lunged forward. It was the woman from earlier, the one who'd wanted to buy some grain.

"Oh gods!" Tahir yelled again, his voice breaking as he shrunk back. He fumbled his next arrow, dropping it to the ground.

"There's too many!" Mlem shouted. He blocked a slash with his wooden shield, then retaliated with his scimitar. "We can't keep them back! Do somet—oh."

The expanding sphere of Immolate had finally crossed beyond the confines of the mill, the outer fringe of the aura starting to work on the nearest of the Memories. Rain's heart was hammering as he clung to his spell, adrenaline born of fear fighting against the horror of what he was seeing. Of what he was *doing*.

They're not real. They're not real. They're not real...

Sharp cracks filled the air as the conjured ice broke. Moments later, there was an explosion of fire. Everyone except Carten and Rain shouted in surprise, cringing back from the rapidly growing fireball. Within seconds, the first of the Memories started to die. Through the flames,

Rain could see their health bars sliding down in an ever expanding-arc. Immolate was tearing through them like the detonation of a bomb in slow motion.

The health bars suddenly froze. The Spirit Caller was screaming again, the unnatural sound stabbing into them like a physical thing. Rain could barely see now, squinting against the ever-increasing glare. The sound of cracking ice told him what had happened. The Spirit Caller had conjured a second layer of armor for the Memories, but it hadn't been enough. The bars were falling again, even faster than before. Rain was forced to squeeze his eyes shut as the flames grew too bright for him to bear. The afterimage of the blaze danced across his vision, taking the shape of the slit in his visor.

"Haaaah! Get fucked, ghosts!" Carten yelled. There was a clang of metal on metal as he slammed his shields together. "Fuckin' hells, Little Mouse!" he shouted, laughing.

The torrent of kill notifications finally slowed, the glare fading. Rain cracked open his eyes, then began to cough. Smoke was filling the air, carrying the scent of charred decaying meat and scorching his lungs as he breathed it in. His Heat resistance accolade didn't do anything to reduce his sensation of the temperature; it merely prevented it from damaging him. To his horror, he saw that Lyn and Tahir's health displays had dropped. Tahir was at 97% and Lyn was at 94%. They'd drop even further if he didn't do something.

"Rain," Lyn coughed, "st—stop! It's too hot—" She coughed again. "I can't—"

Purify.

The world vanished, blotted out by Aura Focus. When it returned, it had changed. Purify had erased the smoke as if it had never been, as well as the charred remains of the Memories that he'd burned up like so much kindling. A few remained, health bars in the red as they

continued to burn. The Spirit Caller was in much better shape, its health bar only a sliver off full. It looked pissed, but Rain was focused on a more immediate issue. The roof above them was burning.

“Get out in the street!” he yelled. He stumbled to obey his own instruction, slipping through the melted snow. His eyes widened as he got a look at the sky. The burning mill was a problem, yes, but it was far from the only one.

Immolate!

The spell spread more quickly this time. What little Heat mana there’d been for it to consume was obviously gone now, but the air was already hot, so the magic spent little energy as it spread. The licks of flame creeping along the rafters exploded into great gouts of fire under the influence of the spell, and steam was beginning to rise from the slush filling the street.

The Spirit Caller roared, but Rain didn’t spare it more than a glance. When the monsters had appeared, the snow had stopped, which he’d hoped meant the end of the lair’s interdiction on fire. Clearly, he’d been being optimistic, but it wasn’t like he’d had a choice. Now, he simply had to pay for it. The lair’s wrath was descending on them, a blizzard so intense that it looked as if a solid wall of ice had been cast down on them from the heavens.

“Rain!” Tahir yelled. He coughed, covering his mouth as he cringed back. “Stop!” he choked.

“Look up!” Rain shouted, pointing at the sky.

Tahir looked up, then screamed wordlessly and ducked, covering his head. The wind hit them first, almost flattening them. It was followed by a downpour of rain—hot, heavy drops, like a monsoon.

Immolate had done its work, saving them from being flattened by the storm. Rain kept channeling, the deluge growing colder as the lair fought against his magic. His eyes flicked to the party display, checking everyone's health, then his mana. He had about five thousand remaining, not having started the fight at full. At fifty mana a second, he'd be able to keep this up for a minute forty, but they'd be royally screwed after that.

There was a roar and a clash of steel on ice. Carten had moved to engage the Spirit Caller, bashing it with his shield and making it stumble back. Rain shouted over the pounding rain, pointing. "Help Carten! I've got the weather!"

Planting his feet, Rain took careful control of Immolate and used Channel Mastery to reduce the power. The water was rising, already past his ankles, blocked by the slush and with nowhere to go. He had to let the lair equalize the temperature before he ran out of juice. Hail began pinging against his armor, the sound blending into a continuous ring as the size of the hailstones increased. Rain cursed, then reversed his grip on Channel Mastery, pushing more power into the spell again.

Shit shit shit!

The hail continued to worsen. He'd gone too far and lost too much heat. He pushed even harder. Finally, the hail stopped, and the rain started to feel warm once more. This time, Rain lowered the power more slowly. He stopped just as the hail began and held it there. Checking his display, he saw that he'd managed to save twenty mana a second, extending their time by another minute or so. Unfortunately, it had taken him half a minute to do it.

Outside his sphere of protection, the world was a sea of white. The spell had carved a bowl in the packed snow, and that bowl was rapidly filling with water as the edges froze solid.

Unbidden, the image of a red-hot nickel ball melting through a block of ice popped into Rain's mind. *Damn it, brain, this is NOT the time!*

"I can't use lightning in this!" Jamus cried. Purple-blue light flashed, an Arcane Bolt striking the Spirit Caller and shaving off a sliver of health. The fight had started in earnest while Rain had been busy with the storm. There was another flash of light as Jamus circled to the left. "This is the strongest I've got without frying everyone!" he yelled.

"We already got fried, thanks to Rain," Mlem called, slashing at the Spirit Caller's flank. He dodged back as it swiped at him with its razor-sharp icy claws. "And now we're getting drowned! I haven't been this wet since I left the isles, specifically when I fell overboard!"

"Stop talking and kill it!" Samson shouted over the hail. He and Lyn were harrying the beast. Lyn's spear gave her enough reach to stay at a safer distance, while Samson needed to be more cautious, only striking when the bear was distracted. The thing was *fast*. Val was blasting it with Solar Ray after Solar Ray, the beams visible for once, thanks to the weather. His mana, however, was starting to get dangerously low. Jamus was doing slightly better, thanks to his larger mana pool. His purple-blue bolts moved slowly compared to Val's instantaneous blasts, but they had much more power, tunneling through the downpour and leaving shockwaves in their wakes.

"Damn it!" Tahir yelled, loosing an arrow. It struck the bear's frost-encrusted hide and bounced away. He'd recovered somewhat, but he still looked shaken as he drew back on his bow. He cursed, letting off on his draw as Carten got in the way of his shot. "Are my arrows even doing anything?" he yelled.

Rain glanced at him. *Oh. He can't see health bars.* "I don't know," he answered honestly, shouting to be heard. "Save them for now!" *I think the others can handle it...*

"Let's try this!" Mlem shouted. The merchant darted in, chopping at the bear's neck, his sword glowing just as Samson's had before. Faster than belief, the bear pulled its neck back like a turtle. Mlem yelped and dropped to the ground, dodging the bear's icy teeth as they smashed together where his head had been moments before. He flailed on the ground, then pushed himself up on one elbow and whipped his arm to the side.

Rain screamed in denial. The Spirit Caller, heedless of Lyn's attempt to stop it, had lunged for Mlem's fallen form. Moments before its teeth snapped closed, Mlem vanished, appearing with a splash a few meters to the right. Only then did Rain realize what had happened. It was difficult to see through the downpour. He'd missed the skipping stone entirely.

"Oi! Oi! Oi!" Carten roared, having circled behind the bear. He lowered his shields and put all of his weight into a mighty kick, his boot striking the gigantic monster right in the asshole. The Spirit Caller screeched with justified rage, then spun, lunging for Carten's face. Instead of his throat, its teeth found a Shield Bash waiting for them. Fragile ice shattered, and the bear stumbled back. By this point, the continued onslaught had brought its health to a third.

"Too fuckin' slow, icy-bear!" Carten taunted. "Ain't so tough without yer spirits, eh?"

"Hurry!" Rain screamed, wading toward the fight so he could reduce the range of Immolate. The water had risen, reaching halfway to his knees. There was no sign that the storm was going to abate any time soon. Despite the death of the Memories, the party display still showed the lair's integrity at 100%. Wherever the lair was getting all this ice and snow from, it didn't appear to count against the total either.

"Yes boss!" Carten shouted, moving in. "Shield Bash!" he roared unnecessarily. "Shield Bash! Shield Bash! Shield Bash!"

The injured bear couldn't get its feet under itself to respond. Lyn, Samson, and Mlem were also laying into it. Jamus, Val, and Tahir had stopped their assault, unable to get any shots in without endangering their allies. Rain's aura had no such issue. All through the fight, it had been active, slowly but surely eroding the monster's health. The system's chime soon announced the Spirit Caller's death, but the ordeal wasn't over.

"Everyone get back here!" Rain shouted, checking his mana. He was down to fifteen hundred. He beckoned, pointing to the mill, the fire long-extinguished by the rain. He grabbed Tahir by the elbow and started towing him in that direction, shouting over his shoulder. "The lair won't stop the storm until the snow is back!"

"So stop meltin' it, genius!" Carten yelled, laughing. He made no motion to follow. Instead, he kicked the downed bear, then planted his leg on it, Captain Morgan style.

"Carten, don't be stupid!" Jamus yelled, clutching his hat to his head as he slogged toward the mill.

"MOVE!" Rain screamed. He reached the safety of the mill, then turned to face the others. A flicker of light caught his eye, and he glanced up, then swore explosively. The underside of the roof was still burning, after all; he just hadn't realized. The flames were building even as he watched, subjected to the full power of his aura now that he was out of the storm. *Fuck me!*

"Carten, come ON!" Jamus yelled again.

"Bah!" Carten shouted, then waved at them. "I'll be fine!"

"I fucking won't!" shouted Lyn, passing Jamus, who was being slowed by his waterlogged robes.

Rain held his breath, alternating his gaze between his allies and the spreading fire above him. Lyn and Samson ducked into the dubious safety of the roof. Val was almost there, holding a pane of light over his head to shield himself. Rain clenched his fists, watching Jamus struggle.

Mlem caught up to the waterlogged mage, then lay a hand on his shoulder and threw something in the direction of the mill. The moment he saw that, Rain sagged in relief. He dropped Immolate, switching to Force Ward. It wouldn't do anything for the cold, but it would stop the hail. They'd have a few seconds before the big stuff hit them. Quickly, he adjusted the settings, prioritizing Lyn and Tahir. Carten was out of range, and everyone else had enough health to survive the collapse of the roof. Hopefully.

Mlem and Jamus vanished, appearing with a splash of displaced water, leaving just Val and Carten out in the open. Carten was laughing, not even bothering with his shields as he roared his defiance at the sky. Val slipped under the roof just as the blizzard struck, angling his barrier to deflect the worst of the hail. Noise exploded as ice slammed into the wood above them.

"Get under it!" Val shouted, his voice barely audible over the din. He raised his other hand and stretched his barrier into a larger sheet, though its light dimmed as he did so. The group huddled together beneath it, fighting to keep their footing against the tide of increasingly frigid water and ice rushing in from outside. Then, there was an almighty crack of splitting timber, and the roof gave way, smashed by the fury of the storm.

Dozer was experiencing an *emotion*.

He didn't have a word to describe it. Words belonged to Rain-King and the other [[GREATER BONESACK SLIMES]] that made up most of his family. Dozer was learning, but remembering was hard. He knew his name, of course, and the *commands*. Emotions, however, were something the [[GREATER BONESACK SLIMES]] almost never used their words for. Things would be much easier for them if they did, Dozer thought. They seemed to have emotions quite frequently. As far as he could tell, they only caused problems.

Problems like he was having.

The emotion pressed on him. Dozer quivered, trying to force it away, but it would not go. It was not an [[INSTINCT]]. It wasn't [[EAT-NEED]], [[SLEEP-NEED]], or [[CLEAN-NEED]]. It wasn't even [[ORDER-NEED]], which was the most complicated [[INSTINCT]] that he had.

Dozer had learned several emotions, but none as complicated as this one. It wasn't *happy* or *bored* or *scared*. The most complicated emotion Rain-King had taught him was *hangry*, which was like [[EAT-NEED]] and [[KILL-NEED]] together, but this new emotion was even more complicated than that.

The worst part about it was that the emotion was making him want to be *bad*.

Rain-King had told him to *stay*. Normally, this would have made Dozer happy. He was in the Forge-Home, and he much preferred it to the horrible cold snow down on the ground. Tall-Brother was here, using his hammer to make plenty of noise. Thanks to the reflections, Dozer could sense the shape of the Forge-Home in great detail. It was comfortable and warm. It was *safe*.

And yet, he wanted to leave.

Dozer wobbled, then reversed direction, resuming his exploration of Forge-Home. He traced the seam where the floor met the metal. He checked near the fire-cave, searching for [[FILTH]] that had fallen from above. He climbed into his box-bed, then counted the pieces of metal that were there. Once he finished with that, he climbed out of it again, then relaxed his membrane to slip past Tall-Brother's metal legs. After he was through, he restored his shape and returned to the seam, checking it once more. Round and round, he circled, not knowing why. He was too busy thinking about the emotion.

Dozer could still feel Rain-King through the [[KING-LINK]], but he was...*far*. So far that Dozer couldn't tell if Rain-King was hurt or if he was in danger. Dozer didn't need anything as complicated as an emotion to know that he needed to protect his [[KING]]. [[INSTINCT]] was enough.

Dozer expelled a piece of metal with a clatter, dropping it back in his box-bed. It would be easy to follow the [[KING-LINK]]. He'd done it before. The problem was that Rain-King had told him to *stay*. If Dozer wanted to protect him, he'd have to break a *command*, which would make him *bad*.

The emotion surged, and Dozer had to fight to keep his shape, clinging to Tall-Brother's legs for support. There were good emotions and bad emotions, he knew. Whatever this emotion was, it was clearly bad. It wasn't *anger*. It also wasn't *fear*, though that was closer.

A vibration from Tall-Brother jolted Dozer out of his thinking.

"Stop that, Dozer. Rain will come back. You do not need to worry about him."

Dozer slowly released his hold on Tall-Brother's legs and slid down into a puddle, confused. He had recognized his name, and Rain-King's name, as well as two different commands. The commands hadn't come from Rain-King, but that was fine. Tall-Brother was close enough. The problem was that the *commands* didn't make sense. How could he both *stop* and *come* at the same time?

Dozer wobbled uncertainly as he reformed himself, trying to understand the rest of the words Tall-Brother had used. Dozer didn't know these ones. Without Rain-King there to hear them too, he had no way to find out what they meant.

Dozer thought about this for a while.

Eventually, he decided that it was too confusing, and that he didn't feel like listening to Tall-Brother anyway. He headed back for the fire-cave. There would be more [[FILTH]] by now. Not much, but [[FILTH]] was always falling from the fire-cave. And then he'd check his box-bed, and then the seam where the floor met the wall. Maybe he'd find something that would tell him what to do about the emotion. Or something that would tell him how he could both *stop* and *come* at the same time.

The next time Dozer pressed himself past Tall-Brother's legs, Tall-Brother rumbled. It wasn't just any rumble. Dozer knew this rumble. It meant that Tall-Brother was also having an emotion. He was *angry-but-not-angry*.

Dozer stopped, reforming himself near the open edge of the Forge-Home. Did he do something wrong?

Dozer thought harder.

No, that couldn't be it. He was being *good*. Tall-Brother wasn't angry-but-not-angry because of Dozer. Tall-Brother must be angry-but-not-angry because of something else.

Dozer put it out of his mind. Since he was already at the open edge of the Forge-Home, Dozer turned his attention outside. He listened hard but heard little. There was too much snow out there. Dozer hated snow. It was cold, and it stole the vibrations from the air, making it hard to sense what was around him. It was even worse than `[[FILTH]]`. `[[FILTH]]` could be cleaned. Snow could not.

Tall-Brother rumbled again. "If you are going to go, go."

Dozer quivered excitedly. 'Go' was a command. Rain-King had said '*stay*,' but that was *long ago*. Long enough that Rain-King might have forgotten. Or long enough to believe that Dozer had forgotten, which was the same thing.

Dozer scrunched himself up, then jumped. He struck the frigid ground with a spatter, then jerked back from it in discomfort. Instinctively, he made himself tall so his membrane would touch as little of the snow as possible. This couldn't last, however, so after a moment, he forced himself to spread back out.

Dozer was *brave*. The snow wouldn't stop him from protecting his `[[KING]]`.

Moving as quickly as he could, Dozer plowed a track through the horrible snow, following the `[[KING-LINK]]`. He heard Tall-Brother call something out behind him, but he didn't pay attention to the words. He didn't want to hear any more commands.

His hearing muted by the snow, Dozer quickly began running into obstructions. This was normal. Most of them were easily circumvented. The only thing that delayed him for more than a few moments was when he ran into Floofy-Cloud. The [[FURRY BONESACK SLIME]] had collected a significant quantity of [[FILTH]]. Obviously, Dozer couldn't leave until that had been corrected.

Dozer liked Floofy-Cloud. He was the best of the [[FURRY BONESACK SLIMES]]. As Dozer worked, Floofy-Cloud proved his goodness by trying to [[CLEAN]] Dozer in return. It wasn't very effective, but at least he was trying, not like Picky-Picky. Picky-Picky only ever [[CLEANED]] herself.

Leaving Floofy-Cloud behind, Dozer continued. Soon, he began to hear a strange vibration, unlike anything he remembered sensing before. It was like a wall of whispers, stretching high above him. Near the wall, Dozer detected one of his brothers, but he couldn't determine which one it was because of the snow. It might have even been a sister. Dozer was still unsure what the difference was.

It didn't matter right now, Dozer decided. He ignored his unidentified brother and pushed ahead toward the wall of sound. He would climb it if he needed to, no matter how high it was. Rain-King was on the other side. Too late, he realized that the brother wasn't a brother at all. It wasn't even a sister. It was Ameliah-Queen. She scooped him up out of the snow, just before he reached the wind-wall.

"I've got him, Tallheart. Don't worry," Ameliah-Queen said. Dozer heard the vibration of her words clearly, pressed as he was against her membrane. He squirmed, but couldn't escape. He couldn't shift his body quickly enough to escape from her arms. It wasn't fair. If he had known that she would stop him, he would have hurried even faster. Dozer squirmed harder, but it was no good.

"Stop that, Dozer," Ameliah-Queen said. "I don't know if it will let you in, and I don't want to find out. You'll die in there. Stop, I said!"

Dozer stopped. Ameliah-Queen had issued a *command*. Still, he couldn't stop completely. The emotion was still there, almost worse now that he was closer. He jiggled unhappily in Ameliah-Queen's embrace.

"It's okay," Ameliah-Queen said, the vibrations of her voice gentle. She squeezed him gently, then began stroking his membrane.

Despite himself, Dozer began to relax. Once it was clear that he was no longer trying to escape, Ameliah-Queen took one of her hands away and pressed it against the wind-wall. As she did this, Dozer experienced another emotion. *Surprise*.

Ameliah-Queen's hand had sunk into the surface. That meant the wall was soft, just like him. He felt more than heard the bones inside Ameliah-Queen shift against each other as she pushed harder. She was trying to go through!

Before Dozer had even finished processing what this might mean, Ameliah-Queen stopped, stepping back from the wall. "There, see?" she said. She gave Dozer another little squeeze, then started rocking him gently. When she spoke next, it was almost a whisper. "They're still alive," she said slowly, then sucked a large volume of air through her membrane, only to let it out slowly. "They're all going to be fine," she said softly. "Shh, now. Shh..."

Dozer wasn't sure, but he thought Ameliah-Queen might be having the emotion too.