

090: Buried

When Rain opened his eyes, there was nothing to see.

The darkness was absolute. He would have thought he was using Aura Focus, if not for the uncomfortable weight pressing down on him and the smell of blood in the air. He tried to sit up, struggling with whatever was pinning him to the floor.

Disoriented, he activated Purify, the soft white light of the spell gently illuminating his surroundings. The first thing that he saw was that the object pinning him wasn't an object at all, but a person. The second thing that he realized was that the person was dead. Purify was dissolving the man's flesh before his eyes.

Rain gasped in horror, canceling the spell and heaving the body off of him. Darkness returned, but the memory remained. He shuddered, pushing himself backward until he hit what felt like a stone wall behind him.

Shit, what happened?

The last thing that he remembered was being dragged out into the hallway, then, nothing. Something had blasted him into unconsciousness. *It must have been Force Ward.*

Rain had activated the spell when Phoss had thrown him, then left it on as he struggled with the officers. It had still been active while the Watch bombarded the entrance to the lair, but that wouldn't have done it. Even if there were some Physical spells in that mess, Velika would have been too far away for the aura to have protected her with the settings that he had been using. It would have covered the Watch, though. At least half of them had been in range. IFF had only been set to exclude monsters, so one of the Watchers must have gotten hit. Hard.

Cautiously, he reactivated Purify, tightening the radius and boosting the power. Light returned, and he could faintly make out the form of the dead man lying in front of him. It was a Watch officer, not one that he knew. The body was lying on its back, sightless eyes staring at the ceiling. Rain boosted Purify a bit more, then winced. The man's skin looked thin and dry, and he could see the muscles of his jaw. The damage was clearly the work of the aura. As for what had killed the man in the first place, it looked like it was blood loss—the man's arm was missing. Rain spotted it lying a few meters away as he looked around the room. *Oh no... What did she do?*

He activated Detection, searching for entities. There were none within the normal radius of the spell, so he used it as a Nova instead. He received scattered signals coming from above, plus a few from his own level. A second pulse revealed that the ones on the surface were coming from humans, the rest from monsters. Reluctantly, he tried again, setting the target as human corpses. Dozens of signals came back, perhaps as many as a hundred. Too many to count in the single-second duration of the Nova.

Rain slumped down, his back sliding against the stone wall. He felt sick. *No...*

It was a slaughter. Velika had won.

Rain forced himself to remain calm. He was still alive, so he should start there. His health was fine, slightly below his current cap of nine hundred. His back was killing him, still sore from the impact with the tree. That was nothing new, so he ignored it. He had more pressing issues at the moment.

He couldn't see far beyond his small pool of light, but obviously, he was still underground. He got to his feet, edging away from the dead man and tracing his hand along the wall. He

cursed as the light revealed the outline of a second form lying prone on the ground. It was another officer, one of the ones that he'd been struggling with. He didn't know his name. There was no point in checking if the man was alive, not with his back bent at that angle. Detection wouldn't have lied, anyway.

Rain spun away, placing his hand against the wall and breathing heavily. *Shit, Melka was in that room. The Watch is...They're all... Why would they attack like that?*

He shook his head. Before he could worry about anyone else, he needed to get out. Quickly, he ran into a problem on that front. The door was blocked by rubble, leaving only a small crack near the ceiling. It looked like there'd been a cave-in. *Shit, what happened? Is it stable, or...*

He tried Detection, finding pockets of air above the rubble. That meant that the ceiling was still at least somewhat capable of holding itself up. He should be able to dig his way out, provided that he worked gently. He slunk back, defeated. One of the pieces blocking the door was particularly large. It wasn't the kind of thing he could move, short of a Velocity-charged body slam. It was a little bigger than a mini-fridge and was wedged into the doorway atop smaller pieces of rubble. It wasn't obvious whether he'd be able to dig under it without disturbing it. If he'd been Tallheart-strong, he could just lift the thing out of the way. As it was, a Velocity slam was just too risky. He wasn't that desperate. Yet.

Further exploration of the room revealed it to be some sort of bath chamber, probably for cleaning off after coming out of the lair. There was a shallow pool recessed into the floor with a drain that led to who-knows-where. The inlet was set high on one of the walls, but there was no water flowing now, and the pool was dry. That was pretty much it, other than the two dead officers.

Rain retreated to the corner furthest from the bodies and deactivated Purify. He needed to think. Even with the light gone, he could still feel the presence of the corpses. It was like Westbridge's attack all over again.

He shook his head. He needed to stay focused.

The grate was no good. Wherever the water drained to, it wasn't the sewers. This room was below the sewers. Even if there was a way out down there, it wasn't open to him unless he could find a way to break the heavy-looking iron bars. The inlet looked more promising, but it was too high for him to reach easily.

It looked like getting out wasn't going to be easy.

He let his head fall back against the stones, trying to grapple with the situation. *The Watch attacked Velika. Velika retaliated, and now they're all dead. Melka, Lamida, Phoss, all of them, probably. Velika wouldn't have stopped. What about Kettel, Val, and the others? Did they get out? The officers had them, but...*

He shook his head again.

Maybe Velika got them out, maybe not. This isn't good. This isn't good at all. If Velika won... If she's still alive...

Fuck. I just promised I'd work for her, didn't I? Great. Now I'm second-in-command to a mass-murderer.

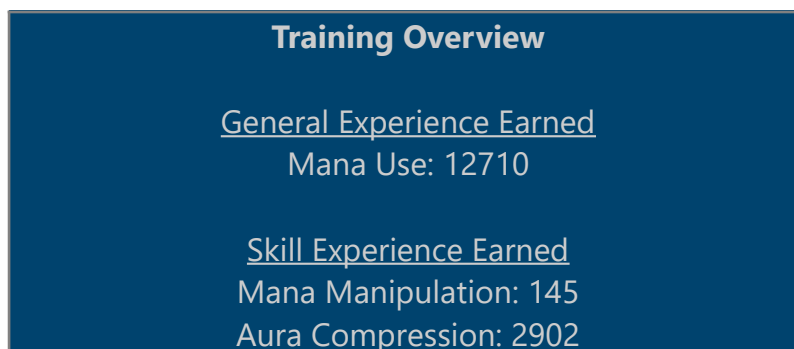
Rain thumped his head against the wall. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

He stopped, wincing as his back complained about the motion. *Well, I can deal with that, at least.*

He opened the settings for his ring and decreased his maximum health. Four hundred and nineteen points were sacrificed, converted to overhealth to heal his body. Immediately, he felt as good as new, physically, anyway. He set the ring back to the previous setting and closed the window. He was in no mood to dig through his stats right now and optimize things.

He didn't even know how long he'd been unconscious. His HUD only told him that it was 5:59 AM, not what day it was.

He considered adding a calendar display to his HUD, but quickly realized that he needn't bother. His log didn't show any new training notifications. That meant it had only been a single day. Immediately as he realized this, his alarm sounded. He'd set it for 6 AM the day before, and hadn't bothered to change it since. He pulled open the window, glanced at it briefly, then closed it.



The image shows a dark blue rectangular HUD display with white text. At the top, it says "Training Overview". Below that, there are two sections: "General Experience Earned" with "Mana Use: 12710" underneath, and "Skill Experience Earned" with "Mana Manipulation: 145" and "Aura Compression: 2902" underneath.

Training Overview
<u>General Experience Earned</u>
Mana Use: 12710
<u>Skill Experience Earned</u>
Mana Manipulation: 145
Aura Compression: 2902

Plenty of time to deal with all that stuff later. For now, I need to get out of here. Those two officers first, though.

He got up and walked over to the closer of the two bodies, letting Purify wash over it and start to do its work.

"May you find peace," he said simply, then boosted the spell to quicken the process. As an afterthought, he extended the range to catch the man's arm as well. The body dissolved rapidly, leaving empty clothes behind, as well as a bronze Watch plate and a few pieces of equipment. There was also a broken potion bottle, which Rain only now realized had come from his own bandoleer. Unfortunately for the officer, it had been stamina, not health.

Rain grimaced as he knelt to pick up the plate. He inspected the Watch's crenelated shield emblem, then flipped it over. There was only a number, no name.

He repeated the process for the other officer then tucked both plates into a pocket of his cloak. The second officer had been wearing a sword and a pouch of money, both of which he took. The sword wasn't magical, and there was a sketch of a smiling woman tucked into the pouch along with the Tel and copper coins. Rain felt horrible when he saw that. His fingers tightened around the sword, and he punched the wall with his gauntleted fist.

"Fuck!" he yelled, shaking his hand.

He boosted Purify to give himself more light, set the sword down, and started pacing back and forth. He glanced at the door, then up at the tiny inlet. *Damn it. I was right there, and I couldn't do a damn thing to stop it. I need to get out of this room, and I need to get out of this ridiculous barrier. I can't fight someone like Velika, not like I am now. I can't protect anyone like this! I'm just a little bitty bug, trying to dodge people's boots. It is unacceptable!*

He walked over to the door, inspecting the rubble. He pushed lightly on one of the smaller pieces, then pulled it away when nothing collapsed. He moved a few more but was forced to admit that he was never going to get out this way. There was another big piece below the

first, visible now that he'd move some of the smaller stones out of the way. There was no way he was going to be able to move either of the big ones. *Unless...*

He pulled up his adaptation panel.

Adaptation						
	Effective	Total	Base	Sync	Buff	Tolerance
Strength	6.72	45	10	24%	35	18
Recovery	7.38	36	10	41%	26	8
Endurance	5.1	28	10	30%	18	7
Vigor	10	25	10	40%	15	15
Focus	39	39	10	100%	29	49
Clarity	229	229	200	100%	29	61

	Current	Tolerance
Enchantment Stat Boosts	152	133
Enchantment Resistances	0	Unknown

All that time in the lair, and only three points of Strength tolerance? Damn it. My Strength sync is so low, it's really hurting me here. How good is 6.7? Sure, I can pick up these little rocks, but the big ones are like something you'd see on The World's Strongest Man. No, even bigger than that. Let's say 10 Strength is peak-human. Would that be enough? I don't need to lift them, just get them out of the way without bringing the ceiling down on myself. If I were stronger...

He shook his head. *No, that's a silly plan. Let me check all my other options first.*

He looked around the room, then up at the inlet. He walked over to it and jumped, falling far short. He jumped again, this time using Velocity. Unfortunately, he overshot, clonking his head on the ceiling. The next attempt was better. He grabbed the lip of the inlet and managed to hang on as his body crashed into the wall. Then, he pulled, raising his head over the edge to get a look into the narrow stone tunnel. Naturally, he needed to switch back to Purify for light.

Wow. I guess 6.7 Strength is something after all. I haven't been able to do a pullup in years. Now I'm doing one easily while wearing armor and still carrying the entire tax code of Ossar in my pack.

He let himself back down with a sigh. There was no way he was going to be able to get through the narrow shaft, armored or not. There was also a closed sluice gate and no obvious way of opening it. It wasn't an issue of strength; he was simply too big. In general, his frame was larger than most people he'd met in Fel Sadanis.

He snorted as he stared up at the tiny inlet. *Probably all of the artificial growth hormones in my breakfast cereal. Val might be able to fit, but there's no way he'd have been able to get through that sluice gate without anyone noticing. How did he get past all the guards, anyway, not to mention all those monsters? My money is on a secret light-based invisibility magic. I'll have to ask him, if he's still alive...*

Rain sighed and looked down at the grate on the floor. He crouched, grabbed the bars, and spread his legs to plant one foot on either side. Then, he pulled, thankful that the overhealth trick had let him repair his back. He'd have done it earlier, but he hadn't wanted Velika to learn about the ring.

No matter how hard he strained, the grate wouldn't budge. He got down on hands and knees to inspect it, checking for a catch, but there was nothing. The metal had been set directly into the stone.

Maybe if I froze it with Refrigerate, then tried to shatter it? I should still have a claw hammer in my pack... He peered through the grate and sighed. *I don't like the look of that bend at the bottom. It looks really narrow. Damn it.*

He turned back to stare at the rubble blocking the door. *So that leaves trying to move those big rocks... Or waiting for someone to come rescue me, I suppose. Humm.*

He pinged with Detection, too lazy to dig through his pack. *I've got twenty ration bars, so I won't starve.* He pinged again. *And about a liter of water, including what was in the first officer's canteen. That's going to be the real problem. If I can get this inlet open, that's another story. Is there a lever?* Ping. *Wow, there actually is.*

He walked over to the wall and grabbed the piece of metal. He'd taken it for an empty scone, but Detection said 'lever,' so he'd clearly been wrong. He pulled, and to his delight, water started trickling in through the inlet. He hurriedly pushed the lever back. He didn't know if there was another reservoir or something above that might run out. *Wait, I can check.* He pinged again. *Nope, doesn't look like it. The column of water goes right up to the river. Okay then. Water isn't an issue. Still, I'm leaving that closed for now. The outlet below is probably blocked off by the barrier, if nothing else. I don't need to add drowning to my list of troubles.*

He looked back at the boulder atop the pile of rubble. *Will this really work?*

He unclasped his cloak and tossed it aside. Next, he removed his messenger bag and all of his pouches, including the bandoleer. His helmet gave him a bit of trouble, the locking ring still warped from when Velika had torn it away. The repair enchant would take care of it eventually, but until then, removing it was a pain. He got the helmet free after a moment and set it aside, then straightened his back and looked at his armored body speculatively.

No, I'll leave the armor on. I'm not sure I can get back into it without help. He sighed and shook his head. *Right, I have one overnight recovery potion, three regular stamina potions, maybe five days of food, and unlimited water. How much training can I do in that time?*

He glanced at his adaptation panel again. He'd gotten three points in strength tolerance from hiking around the lair. That wasn't much, and with his synchronization only at 24%, that was closer to one point in terms of actual effect.

I can do a bit better than that, even before I throw in the stamina potions. Say I can manage five points a day. That's 25 points. Recovery should get better, too, and faster stamina regen means faster training, right?. The real limit is food, I suppose. How much protein do I need to eat, and how much is in a ration bar?

He paused. *No, I can't think of it like regular strength training. I'm not really improving my body per se. This is soul training. Completely different. If I do nothing but push my tolerance for five days, I wind up with 43, meaning...12.72 effective. Humm.*

What if I go the other way and focus on synchronization? If I set the buff low, and just work on sync, I might be able to get two percentage points a day. Seems reasonable. I got a whole point of sync for Vigor yesterday, and I wasn't even trying. My Strength sync is awful, so it should improve quickly, right? So if it's five days, that's ten percent. My effective Strength would only go up to...9.52. Not as good.

Now, what if I do a bit of both? Each point of tolerance that I have makes each point of sync more valuable. Let's see here. Fifty-fifty gets me... 11.745 effective. Oh well. Pure Tolerance training it is. I'll just have to hope that just under 13 Strength is enough.

He stopped pacing and sat down, switching from Purify to Winter. Purify wasn't free, especially at the level required to use it for light. He tilted his head, then pinged for torches, coming up with nothing in the room. He'd lost his in the Tunnel. *Damn. What happened to all of them? Wait a minute, are monsters going to spawn in here?*

After a moment of panic, he relaxed. *They'd only be slimes. Ha, I might welcome the company. Honestly, someone will probably come long before I even get going on this crazy plan.*

He rested his head in his hands.

Am I really doing this?

He thought for a moment. *Yeah, I guess I am. Let's call it plan C. Plan A is yelling really loud and hoping someone comes with a pickax. On that note.*


"HEY! I'M TRAPPED DOWN HERE! CAN ANYONE HEAR ME?!"

His voice echoed slightly in the stone room, but though he listened, there was no response. *Oh well. I'll keep trying. Plan B...I haven't thought of yet. I'm sure it's better than Plan C, though. Anyway, might as well get started. Not like there's much else to do.*

He pulled the adaptation panel back in front of him and played with it for a minute.

Adaptation						
	Effective	Total	Base	Sync	Buff	Tolerance
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Happy with the settings, he left the window open, just moving it off to the side and out of the way. He'd decided on twenty over the limit in all physical stats, with the remainder in Clarity to work on his general tolerance. He wasn't planning on leaving it like that, but starting off with things relatively even would give him a good baseline.

Rain moved into position, placing his hands at shoulder width and doing his best to straighten out his back. He lowered himself down, then pushed himself back up. *One.* A perfect pushup. *Two. Three. Four...*

He smiled faintly, thinking of one of the only shows that had managed to make him laugh during some of the darkest days of his depression.

One hundred push-ups, one hundred sit-ups, then one hundred squats. Cap that all off with a ten-kilometer run. Every. Single. Day.

He lowered himself again, marveling about how easy it was. The ring already had him feeling like a superhero. The Vigor boost, in particular, was utterly absurd from a physics perspective. The energy to move his body had to come from *somewhere*, but according to Melka, that wouldn't be an issue as long as he balanced it with Endurance. The energy came from his *soul*. But where did his soul get it from?

He smiled and shook his head. *Video game logic.*

Thinking about old TV shows and video games helped. The alternative was to think about all of the dead bodies waiting on the other side of the wall.

Damn you, Velika. No, not just Velika. Damn all of them. Westbridge, the DKE, the Empire, and their stupid war.

He kept doing pushups, not even bothering to count anymore. He'd stop when he couldn't continue, then drink a potion and continue anyway.

I need to be stronger.

Mlemlek Ko-Latti was having a bad day, though perhaps 'day' was the wrong word. He really had no idea what time it was. The bells that typically announced the hour had gone wild the night before. That had been the lookouts sounding the alert in response to the Empire's attack. All that it had really accomplished was to give him a headache. It wasn't like there was anything that anyone could do about the army outside the barrier, not with Citizen Sadanis unreachable within the lair.

Mercifully, the constant ringing had stopped after a half-hour. However, the normal schedule had not resumed. Something else must have happened, but he wasn't sure what exactly that could be. It wasn't like he could go check right now.

He couldn't even make a guess at the time by looking at the sky, as another blizzard was raging outside of the dome. It could be midnight for all he knew. It *felt* like it was dawn, but he'd yet to receive his progress report to confirm that. All he knew for sure was that he should have been in bed hours ago.

Mlem sighed, resting his head in his hands. *Lots of storms lately. Did the Adamants summon this one, or is it just a coincidence?* He looked up with one bleary eye. Another shower of fire

had struck the barrier, casting a wave of ruddy light over the city before the darkness returned. *They sure are persistent.*

The bombardment had been continuing on-and-off for hours. Mlem had been concerned at first, but now he was used to it. The initial salvo had been absolutely terrifying, but the barrier had blocked it without showing any sign of weakness. The Adamants had since slowed down. They were now launching magic in waves, likely to give them time to recover their mana in between. From what he'd heard, the army was digging in for a long siege. The message from the Majistraal still listed the barrier's integrity as 'fair,' meaning that the Adamants weren't making much progress, if any at all.

Mlem smiled. *The dominus in charge of this mess must be spitting blood. I wonder if he's told the potentate about his failure yet. Still, how did they get here? They can't have known about the barrier... Or maybe they did know but just underestimated it. From the outside, it must look like this is something the DKE did, not the work of some ancient Majistraal artifact. It's not like those are just lying around.*

Mlem smoothed his mustache, idly. He believed that he'd finally puzzled out the reason why so few Majistraal ruins were ever found. Anything capable of breaching a barrier like this one would have also been capable of wiping the city from the map. Simply by the fact that the Majistraal civil war had ended with their total destruction, their offensive magic was clearly up to the task. In that light, it made sense for most of their cities to have been erased. It wasn't a perfect theory, though. Fel Sadanis was on relatively flat land. He would have expected there to be a crater or something. It was indeed a mystery, one that smarter people than him had spent their entire lives trying to solve.

He sighed, rubbing at his temples, then looked at the building behind him. He was sitting on a crate outside of the small warehouse that he had rented, near the western edge of the city.

The warehouse contained all the food that he'd purchased in preparation for the scarcity that was sure to strike. He was out here to guard it.

He'd sold most of his other goods and spent all of the coin he had on this little gamble. He wasn't about to let anyone take it from him. It wasn't much, especially when compared to the fortune that he had commanded in the past, but it was all he had. Once the prices rose, he would make quite the profit, if he lived that long.

Another volley of magic struck the barrier, arcane lightning this time. The city was colored in violet as the bolts glanced off of the magical dome. It was really quite beautiful. The lack of sound made it seem more like a color show in Xiugaaraa, rather than high-tier siege magic.

He sighed again, thinking of the riots that had broken out across the city. *Idiots*. The barrier would hold, he was sure. If it hadn't even weakened by now, then it wasn't going to. He contemplated adding a new rule, something along the lines of, 'Trust the Majistraal,' but he was too tired to figure out a more appropriate phrasing. He'd set Ava to the task when she woke up. She was surprisingly good at it. Almost as good as her mother had been.

He held his breath, listening. He could hear his daughter's soft breathing from inside the warehouse, thanks to the hearing accolade that he had attuned. It was comforting to his tired mind. What was less comforting was the sound of footsteps headed his way, growing louder by the moment.

"Rotten hulls," Mlem muttered and hopped off of his crate. *How do I always find myself in these situations?* He drew his scimitar, then readied himself to face the oncoming band of looters. *They just don't learn.*

Carten's footsteps were muffled by the luxuriant carpeting as he walked along the hallway. He wasn't carrying his shields or wearing his helmet—both were back in the room that Velika had set aside for him. Instead, he had a leather backpack slung over one shoulder, the contents clinking softly as he walked.

He came to a stop outside Velika's door and nodded to the woman guarding it. He liked this particular guard. Bre-something, he thought her name was. But then again, he liked anyone who was smart enough to use a shield.

"Is she awake?" Carten asked, gesturing at the door.

The woman shrugged. "I think so. Is that what she asked for?"

Carten nodded. "Alls I could find. The nobles say they ain't got much, but I squeezed a few out of them. Most of this is from those two weirdos who run the shop by the south wall."

The guard nodded. "You'd better go on in, then."

"How is she?" Carten asked, apprehensively. "Bad?"

"Bad," the woman replied. "I know I wouldn't want to go in there right now. She almost killed the servant who tried bringing her breakfast."

Carten grinned to hide how concerned he was for the Citizen's mental state. "I'll be fine. I'm too pretty to kill." He ran a hand through his bushy black beard.

The woman snorted, motioning to the door. "Get in there. The sooner she gets those potions, the better."

Carten nodded. "Just wish I'd-of found some of them scrolls. You think her hair'll grow back?"

The woman just shook her head. "I don't know. I think it's her leg that—"

"FUCK YOU, WESTBRIDGE! ANSWER ME! I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!"

Both Carten and the guard winced as Velika's voice boomed through the hallway. The pressure was enough to send dust falling from the ceiling.

"Shit," said the guard, rubbing at her ears. "I hate it when she does that."

Carten frowned. He knocked twice, then pushed open the door and stepped inside. The potions would be enough. They had to be. He hated to see anyone like this, let alone someone who was so beautiful and strong. The sooner that Velika recovered, the better.