

104: Mind

Rain sat in the heart of Winter, feeding mana into his damaged armor as he tried to calm his mind and ignore the fact that his stomach was full of Fungiform Stumper. He was sitting atop the Watch's administration building again, wrapped up in a blanket to block the light of the bonfire that was burning on the stone roof beside him. Three more days had passed since his conversation with Val, and, amazingly, things were starting to settle down. At least, fewer people had died yesterday—less than a hundred.

Rain's services as a mana generator were also less and less in demand with the improvements to the barricade. The Watch, the Guild, and the nobles were now capable of protecting the walls without needing him to keep them fueled with mana. He did still help, of course, but he no longer felt quite as bad about taking a break now and then.

The ground inside the barricade had been cleared of buildings, except those few that the Watch maintained as defensive outposts. People were sleeping out in the open—the barrier took care of pesky issues like winter winds, ice, and snow, but the lack of walls and privacy was less than ideal.

The heat, at least, was being countered. The combined efforts of every mage with a Cold-aspect spell were really starting to make an impact. Large chunks of ice had been scattered everywhere. That wasn't to say that the air was cold, however, or even cool. It was merely less unbearable. Muggy, but without the risk of heatstroke.

Fires and torches were kept burning constantly. The perpetual light took some getting used to, but it was vital for maintaining safety within the walls, so nobody was about to complain about it. They just made blindfolds for sleeping and carried on as best as they could.

Rain wasn't sleeping soundly, that was for sure. It wasn't the light—Aura Focus took care of that handily—it was the constant threat of monsters that made for restless nights. Plus, there was the fact that Velika had joined them two days ago. It appeared that even someone like her needed to sleep from time to time, and preferred to do so without waking up to a slime trying to eat her head.

It was common knowledge at this point that the unstable Citizen was just as trapped as they were. Velika spent her days generally wreaking havoc, smashing buildings, killing monsters, and otherwise venting her frustration. She spent hours each day attacking the barrier with powerful—and loud—shockwaves from her swords. For all Rain knew, it might even be having an effect. The integrity of the barrier hadn't dropped from 'fair,' but neither had it improved.

One thing that the Citizen didn't do, however, was talk to anyone, with the possible exception of Carten. She had no interest in defending the perimeter or scrounging through the city for supplies. Rain had tried to open a dialog with her, but she'd just ignored him, straight up. It had been like talking to a wall.

He feared that she wasn't helping because she was still considering her own escape plan—the one that involved the death of everyone else in the city. Talking to the other survivors would mean acknowledging them as people, not mere obstacles standing between her and her freedom. If she couldn't find the resolve to kill them herself, then, well, all she needed to do was wait.

As for Rain's own, less horrific escape plan, that was in progress. His people from the bathhouse and a bunch of new volunteers were excavating a path to the barrier stone, with Vanna in charge of the operation. Fortunately, the impact site hadn't been far outside the barricade, and Bartum had ordered the perimeter extended to include the area. His Earth mages were helping with the excavation, too, but it seemed that the barrier stone was quite deep. How Velika had gotten down there, Rain had no idea. He hoped it would only take the workers a few more days to reach it. He wasn't sure how long they could hold out before Velika snapped completely.

Food wasn't an issue, at least. After his unpleasant experience with the Skiffun, Rain had thought that all monsters were inedible, but fortunately for everyone, he'd been wrong about that. In fact, some monsters were highly sought after as delicacies. Not Stumpers, though. They were edible, yes, but edible did not mean good. Their mushroom-flesh was bland, earthy, and very, very tough, even when cooked.

Rain had no problem with eating mushrooms. He liked them quite a bit, especially on pizza, but you try eating nothing but squidgy fungus for days on end and see how you do.

Variety was the issue. Toxic moss was growing everywhere now, and it had ruined most of the food that had been in the warehouses. Some had been saved, and it was in high demand. There was a thriving economy for spices, alcohol, and anything that wasn't a mushroom. Mlem, in particular, was making a killing. He'd ventured into the city early on with one of the scavenging parties and returned with a magical self-driving cart full of coffee and other luxuries. Needless to say, this had been well-received by the nobles. So well, in fact, that the Watch had needed to step in to stop them from robbing Mlem blind and leaving his body in a ditch.

Now, though, there was no point in staging any further scavenging expeditions for food. The moss didn't spread quickly where there was light, and not at all in the cold. The illuminated part of the city was clear of the stuff—mostly. The dark section, however, was another story entirely.

Once the moss had taken hold, it had been followed by an orange fuzzy mold, creeping vines, and the beginnings of what looked to be the giant mushroom trees that grew in the Fells. Thanks to the Shift, a bizarre ecology had started to develop outside their little bubble of light.

Unlike in lairs, Monsters in a ranked zone would actually fight and kill each other. Everyone maintained that monsters were not alive, but they did *imitate* life. They didn't *need* to hunt or to eat, but they did it anyway. In the new ranked zone of Fel Sadanis, Razorspines were on the top of the food chain, and Coal Lurkers on the bottom.

Slimes didn't count. Nothing wanted to eat one, for obvious reasons, and they were pretty much left alone.

Incidentally, Dozer had survived. Rain could sense the slime in the building below him, moving around the ground floor and probably being a general nuisance. The slime had just turned up on the second day after the Shift, none the worse for wear, a fact that had become even more astonishing the more Rain learned about monster behavior. While it was true that most monsters didn't have an issue with Crystal Slimes, regular Slimes and Greater Slimes absolutely did. The two types of monsters absolutely *loathed* each other.

Vastly outnumbered, Dozer should have been overwhelmed long before he got to the stronghold. Rain was ecstatic that the Crystal Slime had survived, but the how of it eluded him.

His connection to Dozer had been too weak to track the slime's status from the other side of the city, and he'd also had other things on his mind, such as avoiding death. No one else had any insight to offer, either. After all, who would have been paying attention to a single Crystal Slime in all of that chaos?

Dozer would know what had happened, of course, but the slime wasn't talking.

In other Slime news, Rina, the archer-turned-tamer, had discovered that Crystal Slimes happily sought out and ate the toxic moss that was attacking the city. After learning that yesterday, Rain had made it his mission to Purify as many Slimes as possible. There were now over two dozen Crystal Slimes inside the barricade, acting as bizarre gooey Roombas. Rain was planning to go get more later today. Most of all, he wanted to get a Greater Crystal Slime. He had Purified a few of them and knew that it worked, but he hadn't been able to coax one inside the barricade.

After seeing the Greater Crystal Slimes, Rain had stayed up late last night, experimenting with Dozer. Unfortunately, he'd come up mostly empty. The only useful thing that he'd learned was that Winter helped immensely with obedience training.

Nothing he'd done had given him any clues about how to get the slime to level. Dozer was still level one, and still as dumb as mud, if slightly more obedient mud.

Tel didn't work, and neither did Essence Well. When he'd tried it, the slime's distress had grown quickly, turning to pain as he'd pushed harder. Rain had stopped, horrified by the feeling, though Dozer had soon calmed down and forgotten about it.

What Rain couldn't forget was what had happened to the other, more expendable Crystal Slime he'd selected as a test subject. After around two thousand mana, it had exploded. Violently.

Rain sighed. He'd come up here to clear his mind, not dwell on the fact that he'd tortured an innocent slime to death in the name of science.

I am a horrible person...

He shook his head. To get his mind off it, he decided to review his status, as he'd yet to do that today. He pulled up his character window with a mental flick, then spent a minute futzing with his training overview until it showed him a summary of everything since the Shift.

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
12,749	22,750	514,832

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
HP	600	800	100/d
SP	200	200	300/d
MP	4,684	7,642	2.1/s

Dark Revenant's Armor

	CUR	MAX	RGN
DUR	6,754	1,309	0
SAT	0	13,202	-92/s
CHG	0	14,209	0

Attributes

163/143	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	BUFF	SYN
STR	11.6	40	10	30/37	29%
RCV	4.4	10	10	0/15	44%
END	3.4	10	10	0/16	34%
VGR	14.1	30	10	20/24	47%
FCS	10	10	10	0/49	100%
CLR	293	313	200	113/93	100%

Resistances

0/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	1.0	0%
COLD	1.0	0%
LIGHT	1.0	0%
DARK	1.0	0%
FORCE	1.0	0%
ARCANE	1.0	0%
CHEMICAL	1.0	0%
MENTAL	1.0	0%

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Mana Use: 60,000

Skill Experience Earned

Mana Manipulation: 4,305 [Rank Up]

Tolerances

Clarity: +32

Attribute Buff: +4

Synchronization

Strength: +1%

Recovery: +2%

Endurance: +3%

Vigor: +2%

His armor was coming along. All of the mana that he'd been feeding into it had earned him a rank in Mana Manipulation, bringing him up to eight. That was nice, but it really hurt that he'd been so close to reaching the armor's max durability only to get thrashed down below fifteen hundred.

Durability was weird. It was like health, in that the armor was more resistant to damage when the number was higher, but it was also different. As Rain had started feeding the repair rune, it had started fixing the physical damage slowly, even though the durability wasn't full. Overdurability wasn't a thing, it seemed, not like overhealth.

As it stood, the armor was looking a lot better than it had two days ago. The pauldron fit properly now, and the dent in the breastplate was almost back to flush. The gash in the side had closed up, but there was still a jagged scar in the metal where the edges had yet to fuse together.

Dropping Aura Focus, Rain took a moment to remove the blanket covering him. He dumped five thousand mana into the armor to charge up the hardness and durability runes for the rest of the day, then activated Aura Focus again and returned to reviewing his status.

There was some pretty good progress in other areas too. He'd gained some synchronization: three percentage points in Endurance, two each in Recovery and Vigor, and one in Strength. It seemed that getting your ass kicked was decent training.

Other than his eyebrows, he was fully recovered from the beating he had received. At the moment, he only felt a little stiff, but that was just the soul damage complaining about his lack of movement. Physically, he was fine. His new strength was taking some getting used to, though, especially with how he kept shifting his stats around with the ring.

Strength made you both stronger and faster, and Vigor improved your reaction time. Nobody he'd talked to had been able to tell him precisely how Vigor did that, though. Rain's hypothesis—wild guess, technically—was that it was increasing the signaling rate of his nervous system. Freaky.

In both cases, only the 'effective' total listed on his character window seemed to matter when it came to the influence of the stats on the body.

Strength and Vigor were supposed to be balanced, he'd learned. Too much Strength and not enough Vigor, and you'd slap yourself silly when you tried to scratch your face. On the other hand, too much Vigor and not enough Strength basically gave you lag, increasing the delay between trying to move and actually moving.

When the stats were increased together, the effects were supposed to cancel out, but in Rain's experience, it still threw him off slightly. It wasn't that bad, as he wasn't able to add that many effective points, but still, he'd broken things. Mostly ceramic cups by squeezing too hard.

Also, balancing just Strength and Vigor wasn't enough. All four physical stats affected one another. Recently, he'd been taking points out of Endurance and Recovery overnight, not needing a large stamina pool or boosted health regen. This left him incredibly hungry in the mornings—hangry, actually. The only thing he could usually find to eat was Fungiform, and that did not make for a pleasing breakfast.

It was an acceptable trade-off, free stat points for a mild case of hanger. It allowed him to use them for other things, namely Clarity.

Safe in the Watch stronghold, he'd started pumping himself up to better charge his armor, exceeding his tolerance in the process. That, in itself, had been a risk. He'd been careful at first, and it hadn't caused any backlash, at least as far as he could tell. He also hadn't noticed any side-effects from the appalling mismatch he had going between Clarity and Focus. He suspected that Magical Synergy or something, maybe his class bonus, was protecting him somehow. Otherwise, he was sure that he'd be off chasing squirrels while simultaneously trying to invent the bicycle. Of course, this raised more questions about the viability of the other monoliths, such as Dustrio.

Rain tilted his head, then tabbed up a bunch of skill trees, fully intent on digging through and analyzing which of the physical synergy skills could potentially counter the issues that Staavo had described. *Maybe I can make a build with Fortifico that would be able to heal itself. I mean, Tallheart gets by, and he is super imbalanced. I wonder what he's up to—*

Rain stopped in mid-thought, then slapped himself in the forehead. As he was in Aura Focus, he did this slowly, so as not to accidentally punch his own teeth out.

Maybe I'm being affected after all.

He shook his head, closing out all of the skill trees and returning his focus to his character window. In the end, taking the risk had paid off big time, earning him a staggering thirty-two points of Clarity tolerance over the last few days. He still had the stat boosted at the moment. He would take the points out and equalize his stats before he came down from the rooftop.

The last thing to note on his character window was his total experience. It had gone up.

As an experiment, Rain had asked Bartum to use his soul-sight and watch him as he'd unlocked a tier-three skill tree. The officer hadn't detected any change in Rain's condition, even when he'd unlocked a second tree immediately after the first. His confidence restored, Rain had then triggered his training overview.

When he did this, however, Bartum freaked out a little bit.

In the following conversation, Rain learned that souls naturally applied accrued experience to themselves in the morning and that this process looked something like breathing. You were *not* supposed to be able to do it whenever you wanted. The soul would slowly shrink down, expelling a small cloud of *something*, then expand again, taking *something* back in. Bartum had said that the *something* was mana, but Rain wasn't so sure. Bartum didn't have Mana Sight, he had 'Reading,' which was different and perhaps not a system skill at all.

People generally used the words 'mana' and 'essence' interchangeably, which bothered Rain to no end. He was growing more and more convinced that they were different things, no matter what people said. Even his skill, Essence Well, conflated the two.

Rain was convinced that skill names were like lair names, in that they were defined by people, not the system itself. That raised some interesting questions about what the system actually was, and how it related to souls, essence, mana, and a whole bunch of other things.

Rain sighed and shook his head. *Distracted again.*

The bottom line was that when Rain triggered his training overview, Bartum had seen his paling sort-of *twitch*, then contract suddenly, ripping open on one side and expelling a huge burst of 'chaotic mana.' It sealed itself back up afterward, and Bartum assured him that it looked unchanged from before.

Unwilling to just accept this without further testing, Rain had come back to Bartum the next day to repeat the experiment. The result was identical, and he didn't feel any worse, so he'd decided that he would keep unlocking skill trees. His paling was already busted, and his 'mana' was already as chaotic as it could get. He'd check in with Bartum periodically in case he was wrong, of course. Even if he ended up hurting himself further, though, that could be a victory in a way. As long as it got him some more information.

He needed to understand how souls worked if he was going to fix his, and he hadn't made any progress toward being able to access it through meditation. When he'd talked to Ameliah and Tallheart before the Shift, they'd had no advice for him other than to keep trying what he had already been doing. Neither was familiar with the technique, despite their high levels.

Staaavo and Jamus were likewise unhelpful. Rain was exploring new ground, at least as far as his friends were concerned.

While he hadn't gotten *inside* his soul, he had managed to at least repeat his previous success, if you could call it that. Namely, getting to the door. Over six attempts, he had reached the required meditative state twice. Both times, he had immediately been hurled out of the trance by the chaotic energy that had washed over him.

He was starting to fear that it was a catch-22; he needed access to his soul to fix the damage, but the damage was preventing him from accessing his soul. That didn't mean he had given up, however. Perseverance was key. He wasn't going to quit until he could reach the threshold every time he tried, and probably not even then. He would keep bashing his head against the door to his soul until he broke it down or found someone who knew how to open it properly.

You would think with a broken paling, getting in would be easier. Hell, maybe it is. Maybe I can only get as far as I can because I'm so messed up.

He sighed, waving away all of his windows. All that he had were questions, questions, and more questions. The only thing for it was to try again, which was why he'd snuck up here in the first place. *Well, one reason.*

After pinging with Detection a few times to make sure that he was still safe, Rain switched to Essence Well with IFF set to blacklist everything. In other words, Essence Meditation. He had already been without senses for a while, but now, he didn't even have the flow of his magic to distract him. With these settings, there was no valid target for Essence Well's mana transfer. The void was absolute.

Rain had tried a few times without the void on the theory that any magic use whatsoever, manaless as Essence Meditation was, might be holding him back. He hadn't had any success there. Something would always distract him and kick him out of the required calm. Even the wind was too much stimulation. Once he could reliably get to the threshold by using the void as a crutch, he'd start trying more seriously without it.

With a sigh, Rain flicked off his HUD and focused on his breathing like he should have been doing this whole time. This was going to take a while.

Officer Turton felt superfluous. As the ranking officer in the Lee, it was technically his job to ensure the safety of the unawakened taking shelter there. However, he had been rendered redundant. The two Guilders and the cervidian were so strong that it made him and the seven officers with him look like children.

Ameliah was on the level of a sentinel, as Guild silverplates usually were, so that wasn't too bad. A sentinel he could get used to. Lavarro, however, was in a different league altogether. The woman was famous. After seeing her in action, if she wasn't a Goldplate in disguise, Turton would eat his helmet.

Either way, neither of the Guilders had any trouble defending the barricade now that it was complete. His officers only needed to provide them with token assistance. He hadn't spoken much with the two powerful women, though, grateful as he was for their help. Lavarro was too intimidating, and Ameliah had acted cold and distant whenever he'd approached her. It was clear that neither of them wanted to be here, and yet, they stayed.

Officer Turton could empathize.

He had his reasons for staying, obviously, as did they. Unlike him, however, they were actually strong enough to leave. A full party of eight officers would be safe enough beyond the barricades for a little while, but without the ability to rest and recover, they'd run out of mana, stamina, and health, and likely in that order. Without knowing how far the rank shift extended, there would be no leaving for them.

The armored cervidian—hadn't that been a surprise—was also at sentinel level. He was some sort of warrior-blacksmith, which was astonishing enough in its own right. Crafters almost never made it past the wall, and those that did had gotten there under the care of powerful organizations. The Watch's own crafters were secreted away in Vigilance, too weak to protect themselves from those that would steal them away.

Turton shuddered. Becoming a crafter was basically signing up to become a slave, though it often happened in the opposite order. Crafters were treated well in the Watch, of course, as they performed a vital function. They weren't slaves, obviously, but neither were they free. It wouldn't be a life that he'd ever choose, that was for sure.

As for the cervidian—Tallheart was his name—Turton hadn't spoken with him much either. He had seen him fight, though. Never in his life had he seen anyone with that level of physical strength. The warrior-smith hadn't even used a single skill that Turton recognized, simply tearing the monsters to pieces with his armored hands. They also had Tallheart to thank for the barricade itself.

The cervidian had singlehandedly brought hundreds of trees from the forest on the first night. In the subsequent days, he had made picks, shovels, and other tools. The two bronzeplate Guilders, Jamus and Staavo, had recruited a bunch of the unawakened to wield them. Even now, people were working, feeding dirt and stone into the smith's bizarre smelter and molding the outflow into huge glassy bricks. They were using these to build a more permanent wall around the encampment, freeing up wood for the fires in the process. Every once in a while, the smith would fiddle with a valve, pouring off different metals and casting them into ingots.

Most of that metal had ended up as tools, but some went toward the engineering project that the two crazy—crazier than normal—bronzeplates had cooked up.

Several of their 'light bulbs' were hanging from the stone ceiling of the Lee, strung along a pair of wires. Those wires led to the 'generator' that they had set up. They had dug a channel to redirect the river and gotten the smith to build them a metal water wheel. This was connected to turn the generator, making the light bulbs glow...somehow.

It was clearly magic, though not like any enchantment that he'd ever seen before. He'd asked the Guilders to explain how it worked, but they'd refused, insisting that the process was a secret. The setup was failure-prone, but it was getting better by the day, the light from the bulbs lasting longer and longer before something invariably broke. Turton was reserving his opinion on its usefulness until they got it working properly.

He shook his head. All of the work that the Guilders and the cervidian were doing was a great help, and he wasn't about to complain, but nevertheless, it galled him. As the supposed commander of the Lee, it was the kind of thing that he should have been organizing. The Guilders had just done it on their own, without even asking for his input or advice.

They recognized his authority—Ameliah had stated clearly that none of them wanted to be in command—but they pretty much ignored him most of the time. The sooner he could get the mindcaster working, the better. He needed to know how long it would be before a sentinel would arrive to relieve him.

Turton looked at the mindcaster and sighed. The amplifier formation was huge, requiring a large wagon for it to be moved. The central component was a circlet made of layered bands of black and white crystal. That part wasn't the difficulty. The problem was the numerous crystalline pillars carved with the runes required to make the whole thing work. Half of them were made of white crystal and the other half from black.

The crystal pillars came in different sizes. Some were taller than a man, and others, no larger than a finger. They needed to be arranged in concentric circles around the operator in a precise geometric pattern. Setting them up, however, was more than just a matter of placing them in the correct spots. The area had to be leveled, measurements made, then the first massive pillars carefully moved and sunk into the ground. Everything needed to be stable enough to resist the magical forces that would be exerted when the device activated. There was a reason these things tended to stay put.

Turton sighed and walked over to the pair of officers tinkering with the placement of the smaller pillars. "Are we ready to try it again yet?"

"We think we're getting close," said Officer Brook, swapping two small pillars, each about a hand tall. She wiggled them, making sure that they were firmly planted in the dirt. "Do you want to try it, sir?"

"We've done about as much as we can with it inactive," said the other officer, Gommel. "We can fine-tune it once the enchantments activate."

Turton hesitated. "Is it going to explode like last time?"

"No, we fixed that, see?" said Brook gesturing at three pillars in turn, as if that would actually mean something to him. Turton only had the vaguest idea of how the whole device worked. He shook his head helplessly as Brook continued speaking. "Go ahead, sir, give it a try. Gommel and I are going to need to make adjustments, so it's better if you're the one in the circlet."

Turton sighed, then nodded, walking to the center of the formation, careful not to disturb any of the pillars. He picked up the circlet, and with a nod from Brook, slipped it on and sat on the stool that it had been resting upon. He trusted his officers not to get him killed. If Brook said it was safe, then it was.

This trust was immediately tested as the pillars around him lit up. The runes on the white crystals shone a vibrant blue, and those on the black, a bloody crimson. There was a rumble through the earth as the large pillars shifted slightly, pulling themselves into alignment. A few of the smaller crystals flew out of place, crackling with unfocused magic. Brook and Gommel rushed about, collecting them and arguing about what they had done wrong. The magic didn't fade, however. It was stable, and it grew more so as the two officers slid them back into place.

"Should I be feeling anything?" Turton asked, adjusting the circlet.

"Not until someone activates the other end," said Gommel, jamming a crystal into the ground. It immediately lit up. "Our signet glyph should be glowing on their end now, I think."

"If you didn't have the diagram upside down again, you mean," said Brook.

"I'm sure we've got it now," said Gommel. "Just look at the—"

[Connection established. This is Jarro Outpost. Identify.] Said a man's voice in Turton's mind.

"Shh!" he hissed, frantically trying to clear his mind. "Don't touch anything, and stay quiet. It connected." He closed his eyes and focused on the circlet, pushing his thoughts toward one of the two links that had formed in his mind, the one that seemed to pull at him. That would be the transmitter, while the other one was for receiving.

[This is Officer Turton. Uh... Authorization... shit, what was it? Sable Hunter River Apple.]

[You are not authorized for mindcaster use, Officer Turton. Your signet reads as Vestvall Outpost. Who is the sentinel in charge?]

[I am in charge, and I'm not in Vestvall. I'm outside the barrier beside Fel Sadanis. That was the code that they gave me, and you should already know—] Turton paused, pulling back from the outbound connection, a horrible suspicion coming over him. *Wait a minute. How do I know they're who they say they are. Damn it, I fucked up. I gave them information I shouldn't have.* He focused again. [Transmit your authorization code.]

[Confirmed, Officer Turton.] The person on the other end was amused, his emotions coming through the link clearly. [Counterauthorization Downing Marsh Greater Wardrobe. And yes, you did fuck up, but that's understandable given the circumstances. Also, to mute the connection, focus on blocking your output channel, not pulling away. Either way, we are glad to hear from you. Please wait a moment.]

Turton had slumped down in relief as he recognized the correct countersign. Mindcasters were not a secure system, but he was now reasonably confident that it was the Jarro stronghold that he was talking to. The limited range meant that the only other stronghold he could have reached would have been the one in Southguard. Connecting to either would have been fine; that wasn't what he'd been worried about.

The DKE didn't use mindcasters, but the Empire did. They probably had one with that army of theirs, not to mention relay stations across the badlands so they could reach it. Connecting to one of those would have been less than ideal.

[Officer Turton?] The man's voice said.

[Yes, I'm still here.]

[You were stationed in Fel Sadanis before you were sent to retrieve the mindcaster from Vestvall, correct?]

[Yes.]

[What is the worst tavern in Fel Sadanis?]

What? Why...

[Just answer the question.]

[The Plum...]

There was a pause, then Turton felt the connection fuzz and disconnect. "What the hells?" He opened his eyes and looked around. Before he could signal Brook or Gommel to fix whatever it was that they had broken, the connection snapped back into place, then a woman's voice spoke.

[Hello, Officer Turton.]

[Who is this? What's going on? Is this still Jarro?]

[Yes,] the voice said. Suddenly, the inbound link, which had been like a narrow stream, widened, taking on the vastness of an ocean. Turton tried to shout in surprise, but his jaw clamped down, seemingly of its own accord. Colors swirled in front of him, and an old woman materialized out of thin air.

She was short, with gray hair and a wrinkled face, but she carried herself with a bearing that spoke of power, rather than frailty. Her back was as straight as a board, not hunched as one would expect from someone who was well over a hundred years old.

Turton knew who she was. He had recognized her immediately, as any officer would have, having seen her portrait hundreds of times. His eyes, however, didn't widen, nor did he otherwise react to her sudden appearance. His entire body was rigid, utterly incapable of movement. After a moment, he felt himself relax, taking a slow breath and settling more comfortably on the stool. His body did this on his own. He had no say in it.

[I apologize for assuming control of your muscles without permission,] the Warden said, her lips moving to match the words in his mind. [I am going to release you. Do not react.]

Turton shuddered as his body returned to his control. He did his best, but he was still breathing heavily as he looked up at the woman standing before him.

[Is this camp secure?] the Warden asked, looking around. [I can see using your eyes,] she said, answering Turton's question before it had even fully formed in his mind. [And yes, I can hear your thoughts. And yes, I could read all of your memories, too, if I wanted to. You know that I won't, though, so stop worrying about it... Stop it.]

The Warden waited another moment, then sighed and sent him...something. Suddenly, Turton could remember this conversation being repeated hundreds and hundreds of times, with different people and under different circumstances.

Always the same thing. I am just so tired of it. I don't care about their weird sex secrets, and I wish they'd just stop freaking out about it so I can get on with my day.

Wait, I?

What?

And just like that, the memories were gone. The Warden watched him patiently as he scrambled to process what he had just experienced. The memory was gone, but he could still feel...

[Are you done?] the Warden said, walking forward to peer at him. [Good. I need to know what has happened here since the barrier was raised. Will you allow me to look? One month should do it.]

Turton hesitated. [Can I say no?]

[Of course,] said the Warden. The gaze of her blue eyes felt like ice, but she didn't seem to be angry with him. If anything, her expression read as patient, perhaps slightly amused.

[Do it,] Turton said, finally. He was an officer of the Watch, and this was the Warden. He had nothing to fear, and she had likely seen it all before.

[Yes, I have,] the Warden said. [I think you would make a fine sentinel, and I will make sure you become one, once this is all over. Now, listen closely. Here is what I need you to do.]

[Okay, I'm ready. What is it going to feel like?]

The Warden smiled. [I already did it. What an interesting situation you have found yourself in.] A wistful expression crossed her face as she took another look around. [I almost wish I was there in person. It has been far too long since I left Vigilance.] She shook her head, her face

hardening until it seemed like iron. She walked up to him and stared directly into his eyes. It was all Turton could do to not look away. [You will convince the exGuildler Lavarro that you have found a way to pierce the barrier with the mindcaster. You will tell her that her daughter wants to speak with her. Once she puts on the circlet, I will take care of the rest. You will need to be careful. You don't know the half of what she has done.]

[The ex...exGuildler? I... Yes, but why?]

The Warden peered at him, a calculating look on her face. [Listen closely, Officer Turton. I will tell you exactly what to say and how to say it. If she suspects you are trying to fool her, she will kill you. Stop panicking, officer. You can do this. You WILL do this.]

Turton tightened his grip on the stool, then nodded. He would do his duty, even if he was afraid, and, honestly, more than a bit confused.

The Warden smiled.

With a frustrated grunt, Rain released Essence Well and let his head fall into his hands. *Damn it.*

He wasn't going to get there today. His mind simply refused to calm down. He'd been up here for almost two hours now. That was enough. The slimes weren't going to Purify themselves.

With a sigh, he got to his feet and stretched. His pack was sitting next to the blanket he'd been using to shield his armor. He quickly ran an inventory in his mind, then decided to leave it where it was. It would be fine there, and he had everything important on him anyway.

The sudden sound of raised voices caught his attention, and he followed them over to the edge of the roof. Looking down, he saw Vanna facing off against Rankin, of all people.

Rain frowned. He hadn't spoken to Rankin since the Shift, and for good reason. The temporary Guildleader was an ass. He crouched down to listen, wondering what Vanna was doing here and why she'd brought Rankin with her.

"So, he's in there, huh?" Rankin said, pointing at the back door to the administration building, which was directly below where Rain was situated.

"I told you I would go ask if he wants to see you," Vanna said. "Stop following me and just wait."

"He is in the Guild, which makes me his boss," Rankin growled. "I don't care what he wants. I'm going in."

"No, you aren't," Vanna said. "This is the Watch's building, you'll have to go around front and ask them."

"Give me the damn key to that door. I know you have one."

"No," Vanna repeated, crossing her arms. Rain smiled as Rankin threw up his hands with an exasperated noise and spun away in anger, headed toward the main entrance.

Vanna looked up, her eyes searching. She spotted Rain, then smiled and winked at him. Rain smiled back. *Good. Always look up. I am glad someone is listening.*

He motioned to her to wait, balancing his stats as he watched Rankin stomp around the side of the building. He gave it thirty more seconds, then activated Force Ward and looked straight down.

Another reason he kept visiting this rooftop was to force himself to confront the fear of heights that had taken root after the chasm incident. He still felt that fear even now, irrational as it was. He bit down on his tongue, hard, making sure that Force Ward was active. Then, he jumped.

As he fell, he threw his arms out like a skydiver. It wasn't *that* far, only four stories. He barely had time to orient himself before he face-planted into the packed dirt with a loud whump.

"Graceful," Vanna said, taking her hands away from her ears. She extended an arm to him and pulled him to his feet.

"Thanks," Rain said, checking his mana. He'd lost less than he expected. *I keep forgetting about the forceweave. I really need to do some proper tests.*

"So, I am guessing this means you don't want to talk to him?" Vanna said.

"Not even a little bit." Rain said, absently dusting himself off with Purify. "What did he want?"

"He wants you to stop working with the Watch," Vanna said with a shrug. "He said if you want to do anything else for them, you need to get them to submit the request through the Guild."

"Screw that," Rain said. "I asked Gus. There's no rule that says I have to go through the Guild to do stuff. I can do what I want."

Vanna tilted her head, "You're not showing a lot of loyalty there."

Rain reached up to touch the bronze plate hanging from his neck, then let his hand fall. "Yeah, well, not to him anyway. Maybe if he was less of an asshole." He started walking around the building in the opposite direction Rankin had gone, Vanna following. "What's going on with you, Vanna? I haven't seen you in a few days."

Vanna shrugged. "I've pretty much been living in the pit."

♪*The Pit. I fell in it, The Pit. You fell in it, The Pit.*♪

Rain shook his head, fighting away the words. With the way his memory worked, music tended to get stuck. "How's that going?"

"Want to come see for yourself?" Vanna pointed as they rounded the corner of the building. "I left my brother in charge. Knowing him, he's probably made a huge mess of things already."

Rain nodded. Talking to Vanna was quickly putting him in a better mood. "Sure, let's go. I think I might dig a bit, get some exercise, you know? I was going to go slime hunting, but I'm really up for anything." Rain rolled his shoulder, the one that had been injured. There was no pain, only the stiffness from his soul.

"Hey, Rain, did you see Rankin?" Val asked, appearing suddenly beside him.

"Ah!" Rain gasped, whirling.

Val grinned. "Finally got you."

"Yeah, yeah," Rain said. *That's it, I'm using Detection all the time from now on, no matter where I am.*

"Hey Val," Vanna said, smiling warmly at him.

Val smiled back, grinning from ear to ear. Rain blinked as Vanna maneuvered past him so she was walking next to Val.

He raised a pitiful excuse for an eyebrow. "What's that about?"

"Nothing," Vanna said. She reached out and straightened Val's jacket casually.

Rain stumbled to a stop, looking between them. "Wait, what did I miss?"

Val looked at Vanna, then shrugged awkwardly. "We, uh..."

"You two hooked up?" Rain asked, incredulous.

"What does that mean?" Vanna asked, stopping to look back at him.

Val coughed and cleared his throat. "Never mind that, Rain. You know Rankin's been looking for you since yesterday, right?"

Rain smiled and started walking again. *Good for them.* "I saw him. He didn't see me."

"You can't keep avoiding him, you know," Val said. "Take it from someone who's a master of bad plans."

"I know," Rain said. "I'm just not great at confrontations. That's Carten's department. And yours, I suppose."

"Carten is Mazel's nephew, right?" Vanna said. "The loud one with the beard and the shields?"

Rain nodded. "Yeah, that's him. You seen him lately, Val?"

"I ran into him yesterday in the tavern," Val said. Rain didn't need to ask which tavern. There was only one, and it was less of a proper bar and more of where all the barrels of alcohol had gotten stashed. Khurt had set it up.

Val sighed and rubbed at his neck. "He said Velika dumped him."

Vanna looked startled. "Velika? Citizen Sadanis?"

Val nodded. "Yup."

"Dumped?" Rain asked uncertainly. "You mean like...broke up?" *And she didn't kill him?*

Val nodded. "That's what I said. Dumped. Broke up. No longer seeing each other. Is this a translation problem? How would you say it?"

"The same way," Rain said, shaking his head. "That's what caught me off guard." *Did she really dump him, or did she just start ignoring him like she's ignoring everyone else?*

Val shrugged. "What was that language of yours called again?"

"*English,*" Rain said, absently. *Well, if Carten and Velika really are done, then at least I don't have to worry about him saying something stupid to her anymore.*

"And where do they speak...*English?*" Vanna asked. "You never did tell me where you were from."

Rain hesitated, then smiled, though he quickly hid the expression. "They speak *English* in *What.*"

"Where?" Vanna asked.

"No, What," Rain said.

"What?" said Val.

Rain lost it, breaking out into a grin. "Exactly."

"Punch him, you think?" Val said, looking at Vanna.

Vanna shook her head. "He's wearing armor. I was thinking trip him."

Rain laughed and raised his hands. "Fine, fine, I'll stop. Remind me to do Who's on First for you sometime. That should be easy enough to translate." *I suppose I have to explain baseball first. Now there's an idea. Maybe I should try to set up a game. People could use a distraction.* He made a fist, squeezing tightly, feeling the strength in his fingers. *I bet I could smack the shit out of a ball now, and with Velocity, running the bases would be easy.*

"Uh oh," Vanna said.

"Agreed," Val said. "He's got the look."

"What look?" Rain asked.

"You know what look," Val said.

Rain sighed. *Damn it, I got distracted again, didn't I? Since when do I have a look?*

He shook his head. "Anyway, back to Carten. Is he okay?"

Val wiggled his hand. "He's taking it really hard, but she didn't injure him if that's what you mean. Best thing for him, actually. I mean, I could kinda see them working, before all of...this." He gestured vaguely. "She's totally lost it now, though."

Rain nodded, not about to get into a commentary on the Citizen's mental state. "Yeah, Carten really liked her, though. I'll track him down later before he does anything stupid." *I should have talked to Carten about Velika earlier. He might know something about what she's thinking.*

"Probably a good idea," Val said.

The group reached the edge of the excavation, and Vanna climbed the lip, then pointed. "There's Smelt. I'm going to go say hi."

Rain looked down into the pit, forcing himself to join her on the edge. The bank below him was surprisingly vertical, the earth barely sloping at all. The workers had made astonishing progress, digging a hole ten meters down, and at least twice that across. Rain knew that Bartum had sent some Earth mages to help, but still, it was impressive.

The entire pit was lit by torches and was swarming with activity. Heavy equipment had no place here, just buckets, shovels, wagons, and lots and lots of volunteers. Construction by

flash mob. Rain saw no sign of any Earth mages at the moment, though there were a few Watch officers standing guard on the far side of the rim near the barricade.

Val glanced at the sloping entrance to the hole, which was a distance to the right, then looked straight down. "Rain, are you thinking what I'm thinking? Wanna take the quick way? You can cover all of us, right?"

Despite himself, Rain smiled. "Yeah. I've got plenty of mana. Let's do it."

"You mean jump?" Vanna asked, taking a step back from the edge and looking at Rain uncertainly. "I know you said it works on other people, but you're, well, awakened. I'm not."

"You don't have to jump if you don't want to," Val said. Rain blinked and looked at him. *Is he sick?*

Vanna took a deep breath, stepping forward again. She glanced at Rain. "You're sure it's safe?"

Rain nodded. "As safe as it can be. You're putting your life into my hands, though. Walking would be the smart thing."

"No, it's fine," Vanna said, shifting closer to Val. "Should be fun, right?"

"That's the spirit," Val said, grabbing her hand.

Rain activated Force Ward, then nodded. It was his turn to feel nervous. The trust they were showing him was ridiculous, now that he was thinking about it. "Safety check before we go. Vanna, punch Val in the head."

"What?" Vanna said, then shouted as Val's fist flew at her face. It struck Force Ward harmlessly, the water-drop ripple in the air clearly visible.

"See?" Val said, laughing at her reaction. Without warning, Vanna slugged him back, creating a second distortion in the air.

She looked down at her fist, then back at the laughing Val. Then she looked at Rain. "Can you lower it on him for a second?"

Val stopped laughing, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

Rain bit his own tongue hard, just to make sure he was covered as well. He crept closer to the edge, then fought off a sudden bout of vertigo as he eyed the dirt at the bottom. "When you jump, really throw yourself out there so you don't hit the side. Spread yourself flat while you fall, or you'll stick in the dirt like a pencil. For future reference, the normal range of this spell is about twenty-five stride. It wouldn't be an issue here, even if I wasn't jumping with you, but all the same, never do something like this unless you're *sure* I'm ready. Talking to you, Val." He looked back at them. "Everyone ready?"

"Wait," Vanna said. She waved her arms, calling down to the workers below, some of whom were already watching. "Hey, watch this!"

Many more faces pivoted up in their direction.

Val laughed. "Uh oh, Rain, now she's done it. Everyone is going to want a turn."

Rain sighed resignedly. "Don't I know it. Come on, before I think better of this. Jump when I get to three. One. Two. Three!"

He jumped, hearing the others follow him. There were three solid impacts as they plowed into the dirt amid cries of alarm from the spectators. He got up quickly on his own while Val helped Vanna to her feet. She looked a little green, but she was smiling and unharmed.

"What the fuck, Vanna!?" Smelt shouted, pushing through the crowd. "Are you insane?! How are you not dead?!"

Vanna laughed and hugged her brother, then released him and pointed at Rain. "Perks of having an adventurer for a boss."

Rain snorted as the crowd broke out into cheers. "Do it again!" someone shouted.

Rain shook his head. *No way am I making this a regular thing. I'm not a carnival ride.*

"Hey Rain, clean me off, would you?" Val said, gesturing at his dirty clothes. All three of them were filthy from the impact.

Rain shook his head, looking up. "One second."

"Why? Oh," Val said, after following his gaze.

Dozer was flying through the air, having flung himself from the lip of the pit. Rain had noticed the slime following them shortly after they'd left the administration building, unhappy at being left behind.

Dozer hit the ground like a cannonball, leaving a sizable divot in the dirt. Under the influence of the spell, Dozer's body didn't deform at all, landing more like a meteor than a puddle of goo. Rain was pretty sure that the slime would have been fine without Force Ward, but he wasn't going to take any chances.

Several minutes of chaos followed. Rain allowed Dozer to clean off a few people before he used Purify, knowing that the slime would be distraught if he didn't. Crystal slimes ate filth, operating under much the same rules as Purify did. Dirt on the ground outside was not filth. Dirt on someone's skin was. Judging from the state of the workers, the slime was going to have its work cut out for it.

Looking around, Rain noticed clear signs that the Earth mages had been plying their craft. The floor of the pit was mostly dirt, even at this depth, but he could see large outcrops of stone here and there, shattered into manageable chunks by Earth magic. A quick pulse of Detection told him that most of it wasn't bedrock, merely boulders. In the deepest section of the pit, however, there was a flat section of rock that extended down further than Rain's scan could penetrate. If over a hundred meters of solid stone didn't count as bedrock, he wasn't sure what did.

He shook his head. They shouldn't need to dig through all of that. He couldn't boost Detection's resolution high enough to distinguish crushed stone from solid, not without hurting himself, but it should have been easy enough to follow Westbridge's path through the rock by eye. He looked for Vanna, spotting her talking to Smelt, then walked over to them.

"So," he said without preamble. "Why is the pit so wide? Weren't you following Westbridge's tunnel?"

"We lost the trail two days ago," Vanna said. She pointed at the exposed bedrock. "We were digging there, following the disturbed earth, but it vanished when we hit stone. I thought Westbridge might have gone sideways or something, so we spread out, but we haven't been able to find anything else." She looked at her brother. "Did you find anything while I was gone?"

Smelt shook his head. "Not a thing. It's strange."

Rain frowned, walking over to the area that Vanna had indicated. The stone was mostly smooth, but there was one place where it looked like it had been crushed and shattered, perhaps by an Earth mage. Rain pointed at the spot. "What about that?"

"What about what?" Smelt said, moving to stand next to him.

"The crushed stone, there," Rain said. "Was that an Earth mage? Did you try to dig through?"

"Crushed stone?" Vanna said, joining them. "What are you talking about?"

"That, right there." Rain pointed at the shattered rock.

"Just looks like the rest," Smelt said. "We didn't try to have the Earth mages break through this. Not after we lost the trail."

Rain blinked. *Something strange is going on here.* "Seriously, you can't see this?" he said, walking into the center of the crushed area. He bent and picked up a small stone, holding it out to them.

"Woah!" Vanna shouted.

"How did you do that?" Smelt said, staring at the rock. "Nobody is that strong."

"Do what?" Rain asked, looking at the rock. It was just a rock, no bigger than his fist.

"You just ripped that rock out of solid stone with your bare hands," Smelt said, pointing at it.

"No, I didn't," Rain said, pointing at the ground. "There's tons of them. I just picked one up. I think there's some kind of illusion. You really just see smooth stone?" He activated Detection, tightening the radius so it was less overwhelming. Then, he began boosting the intensity gradually. Smaller signals started splitting from the larger fuzzy sense of 'rock' as he did so, but he was forced to stop as it became overwhelming. The results were inconclusive.

"Well...yeah." Smelt said.

Huh. It has to be an enchantment. Maybe something the Majistraal did to protect the artifact. Why can I see it, but they can't? Is it because they aren't awakened? Rain looked around until he spotted Val playing with Dozer, then waved to him. "Hey, Val, come here for a sec."

"Yeah?" Val said, walking over. Dozer trailed after him, full of dirt and as happy as could be.

Rain pointed at his feet. "Am I standing on flat stone, or is it all crushed?"

"Uh? Flat stone?" Val said.

"Wait, really?" He gestured at the ground. "What does it look like to you? Is it just flat rock like the rest?" He held up the rock he was holding. "You don't see a bunch of shattered rocks like this one? What about something weird, like a magical barrier?"

Val shrugged. "Doesn't look like anything to me," Val said.

Rain froze. "You did not just say that."

"Say what?" Val said.

Rain looked down at the crushed rock, seriously questioning his reality. *Okay, someone is messing with me.*