

## 85: Guide

"Hey, assholes guarding the door! What the FUCK do I pay you for?!" Velika shouted as she marched through the barrier.

Rain winced as she disappeared, her name dropping of the party display as she passed through the barrier. *I really wouldn't want to be them right now.* He kept listening. The muffling effect of the green magic hardly did anything in light of the volume of the Citizen's anger.

"You had ONE job! ONE! How the depths did someone get past you? Did you let them in on purpose? Is it one of your fucking nephews or something? Or did someone bribe you?"

There was a pause.

"SPEAK!" the Citizen roared.

"My lady...I..." came a trembling male voice.

"Citizen!" Velika snapped. "If you're going to use the fucking title, you'd better get it fucking right. Now answer the question!"

"We did no such thing, Citizen," said the other guard, speaking frantically. "We have been standing here since sixth bell. There has been no one. We would never presume to..."

"DON'T YOU FUCKING LIE TO ME!" Velika screamed.

"We would never dare lie to you," said the guard. "Perhaps the previous shift..."

"FUCKING USELESS!" Velika shouted. "I don't have time for this! Don't either of you fucking move."

Rain stepped back as someone flew through the barrier. Counter to his expectations, it wasn't the Citizen. Breggeh stumbled as she landed, clearly having been tossed.

*Wait, if the limit is eight, and Breggeh is in here, then how is Velika going to—*

The barrier darkened, and the Citizen's outline became visible as she attempted to pass through. Rather than flowing around her like smoke as it should have, the barrier stretched, conforming to her body like shrinkwrap. The green light grew in intensity as the Citizen forced her way inside, flickering as it resisted.

Velika took one step into the room, then two, the barrier thinning as it was forced to stretch. Finally, it burst like a balloon, the torn fragments of magic snapping back to reveal the angry Citizen standing there. Behind her, tatters of green magic hung in the doorway, a ragged hole torn in the center by her passage. The barrier rapidly recovered, resealing itself and blocking Rain's view of the hapless guards.

"FUCK!" Velika screamed again, clenching her hands.

Rain glanced at his HUD. Both Citizen Sadanis and Breggeh were listed there, meaning they were both in the party. *Well, that takes care of that.*

"You," Velika growled, pointing at Rain. "Come here." She marched toward the exit that led deeper into the lair.

*Oh shit. She's not mad at me, is she? I had nothing to do with this...*

Reluctantly following, he pushed his own terror and distaste aside. He needed to work with her if he wanted to keep her calm. "How can I help, Citizen Sadanis?"

Velika sighed. She walked through the door and stopped on the stairs to look up at the fake sky. Dim green light filtered through the leaves of the trees. The entire area looked like it was outside, but Rain had more important things to worry about than the spatial discontinuity. The Citizen glanced at him, then continued down the stone stairs and out into the swampy forest.

Rain trailed after Velika, careful to follow her exact path. His feet left deep footprints in the loamy soil as he walked. He became increasingly distressed as she kept going, to the point that he had to stop himself from sighing in relief when she finally stopped. The temple was still in sight through the trees, barely. Detection revealed nothing around them, though he had picked up a slime in the distance. Velika was standing on a bank overlooking a swampy expanse of water and trees that extended as far as he could see. He stood a few meters behind her, waiting to see what she would do.

Velika pointed at the ground beside her, not looking back at him. Rain reluctantly moved forward to stand in the indicated spot. Still, she didn't look at him, staring off into the distance. He peeked at her face out of the corner of his eye slit, careful not to turn his helmet.

*Shit, this is bad. I don't know what to do. She's like a volcano that's ready to erupt at any moment. Compared to me, she's a force of nature. Any little thing could set her off, and there's nothing I can do about it. She basically killed Melka, and I haven't seen Carten for days. I hope he's okay and she didn't make him... Damn it, it's still messed up, even if he was willing.*

Velika shifted, and he tensed, but she didn't do anything else, other than to clench and unclench her hand.

*She and Westbridge trapped us all in here and threw away the key. I'm angry, but what the hell can I do? How can you fight a force of nature? She's terrifying.*

Velika sighed, her shoulders slumping as she looked away from the swamp and up at the fake sky. Her eyes locked onto him, her expression calmer, seeming speculative. He froze, like a mouse that had been spotted by an owl.

"What is your opinion of me?" she asked.

He licked his lips, choosing his words very carefully. "My opinion is that...you are someone that is not to be disobeyed."

"Then why does everyone keep disobeying?" she said, looking back out at the swamp. "I give simple instructions. The simplest. Don't let anyone in here. Is that a complicated command?"

Rain shook his head, saying nothing.

"What do you think I should do to them?" she asked, gesturing back at the temple. "The guards who failed me."

*If I were her...* "I would find out the truth. Maybe it was the previous shift like they said, or maybe the intruder has a stealth skill or something. Until you know what happened, you can't decide what punishment is appropriate...if any."

Velika slashed at the air with a hand. "They're all out to get me. Every last one of them. They bow and scrape to my face, then when my back is turned, they betray me. Those guards did this on purpose. I know it. The nobles are pushing me, trying to see how far I will bend. How much I will let them get away with." She clenched her fist. "I need to send a message. A public execution would get the point across, no?"

*Damn it, I'm going to get myself killed.* Rain cleared his throat, saying the first reasonable thing that popped into his head. "Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity."

Velika looked at him, then snorted. She relaxed her fist, and Rain breathed a sigh of relief. "That's pretty good. Who said that?"

*I could claim it; It's not like she could check, but no.* "The great philosopher Hanlon."

It was Velika's turn to sigh, looking back at the swamp again. "What if they're being both stupid *and* malicious? Wouldn't I be better off without such people?"

Rain gritted his teeth. *Damn it, someone is going to die if I don't do something.* "Citizen, if I may make an observation?" She remained silent, so he took that as a sign that it was safe to continue. "Right now, you are trying to rule through fear. Personally, I can tell you that I find you downright terrifying. I worry that if I say the wrong thing or defy you in any way, you will have my head on a pike. However...that is not..." He pressed his hands to his sides to stop them from trembling. "That is not a sustainable strategy for ruling."

"And why not?" Velika snapped. "If people are afraid, they will stay in line."

"While you are watching, yes," Rain said. "But when you cannot watch them? They will go back to placing their own interests first, and yours, second. If you publicly execute those two, and it turns out not to have been their fault, what will happen? What will their families do? What happens when people realize that they can't please you, no matter what they do?"

Rain held his breath, watching her expression like a hawk. The anger had faded, her eyes staring off into the distance. *Oh, thank heavens.*

"I didn't want this," Velika said after another minute of silence. "I didn't want any of this. I only became a Citizen because I wanted to be strong enough to just...do whatever."

"You are," Rain said. "Strong enough, I mean. Strong enough to be free. Just leave, if that is how you really feel. Lower the barrier; leave the DKE and this whole continent behind. No one will stop you. By the time Westbridge finds out, you would already be gone."

"I can't do that," Velika said, looking away from the swamp and back toward the temple, barely visible through the dense trees.

"Why not? Pardon me for saying this, but I don't see you as the type to be loyal to the DKE's cause."

Velika sighed deeply, then started walking back toward the others. "I'll think about what you said." She paused, looking over her shoulder at him. "Use your own logic. Tell me what will happen if people see me as weak? What then?"

Rain shook his head. "I don't know. Probably nothing good, unless you can gain their sympathy. You haven't done anything to give people a reason to see you as anything other than a tyrant."

"And your sympathy? Do I have that, or do you see me as a tyrant too?"

Rain frowned, then answered honestly. "I don't know."

Velika's expression hardened. "This conversation stays between us. Come on. We need to find whoever is in here and start straightening this out. I'm going to go...talk to the guards." She held up a hand. "Just talk. You keep an eye on the idiots until I get back, then we can go hunt down the piece of shit that snuck in here. Keep them in the temple."

Rain nodded, following. He didn't notice, but his hands had stopped shaking.

Once Velika passed back through the barrier, the others pounced, wanting to know what he and the Citizen had been discussing. He didn't answer them, sitting in the doorway that led out into the swamp. He listened passively to their speculation as he waited, breathing deeply. *She isn't as unreasonable as I thought. That's good. Should I count that conversation in the 'times I almost died?' log?* He sighed deeply, staring up at the fake sky. Other than the eerie silence, it really did look like a natural forest.

*She said she couldn't do it, not that she wouldn't...*

*It fits. Damn it, it all fits. I think...I think I might just be right about this...*

*What is Westbridge's game?*

---

Before he knew it, the respite was over. He'd calmed down considerably even though it had only taken Velika around ten minutes to finish up the business with the guards. He hadn't heard any screams through the barrier, so he took that as a good sign. She broke through once more, her expression cold and controlled.

Rain got to his feet, turning to face the rest of the party. He looked over them, finalizing the plans that he'd started concocting while waiting.

He had decided upon a sort-of wedge, with himself at the tip. The woman with the shield and mace, Breggeh, and the red-armored lordling would stand on either side of him. The man's name was Bosco Deitrich, and while he was a bit pompous, he seemed to know how to use the spear that he carried. He was younger than Rain and was the only other member of the party wearing a helmet, though it lacked a faceplate.

Arlo would be placed on the same side as Breggeh, who seemed to be the most competent of the six. She looked to be the oldest of the group, maybe in her thirties, and wasn't wearing flashy or expensive equipment. Rain's guess was that she'd served as a merchant's guard or something. The way that she'd swung the mace at the Citizen said that she'd seen combat before. He wasn't sure that the same was true of the nobles. Breggeh would hopefully keep Arlo from getting himself into too much trouble. He just wished that she'd remembered to bring a helmet.

Kettel would go on the other side. He said he was good with the staff, and Rain was inclined to believe him. The kid was young, but he'd already proven himself to be a competent fighter, even barehanded. The left flank was the best place for him, as far from Arlo as possible. Rain didn't want any incidents, and there was clearly a feud brewing between the pair. Sticking to the theme, Kettel's head was also bare, his light brown hair sticking up like thatch. *Why does everybody want to get their skulls caved in? Helmets, people, come on.*



The last of the unawakened were an archer by the name of Rina Ashworth and a swordsman, Samson Darr. Rina was young, perhaps twenty, attractive, and she knew it. From the way she talked, she was also overconfident beyond all belief. She hadn't brought anything but her bow and arrows, not even a knife as a backup. It was the center of the wedge for her. That was the safest place for the idiot without a melee weapon to be, no matter how good of a shot she actually was.

He hadn't quite figured out what to do with Samson yet. He looked like he was the same age as Rina, but the contrast between the two couldn't have been more apparent. Where Rina was tall and blond, he was short and black-haired. Where she wouldn't shut up about her marksmanship, he said almost nothing. In Rain's estimation, he probably knew what he was doing much more so than the three braggadocios. Leaving him to guard the rear might be a good idea.

Velika... Velika could do whatever she wanted. She was fully attired for battle in her lamellar armor and with her panoply of swords. Her black hair was tied back into a loose tail, only a few shades darker than her skin. He wasn't about to comment on her lack of a helmet.

Rain nodded to her, then cleared his throat. "Okay, here's the plan. Outside this door is what the Watch calls the Forest of the Drowned. We're in the Temple now. We've got to get through the Forest before we get to the Mushroom Cavern, and after that is the Tunnel, and then the Fetid Bog. There's another temple in the center of the Bog, called the Shrine. That's where the core is. I'll explain more as we go. It's pretty linear, though it won't always seem like it. Now, I haven't ever been in here myself, so all of this is second-hand. Watch out for the unexpected. It will get more dangerous as we go. The Forest should just have slimes and Plague Rats. Hands up, who's killed a slime?"

Kettel, Breggeh, Bosco, and Rina raised their hands. Velika scoffed, then wandered off to inspect the stones of the temple. Rain glanced at her, then at the two members who hadn't raised their hands. "Slimes are weak. They are slow but will jump at you when they get close. Just try not to get any on you. If one envelops you, I'll take care of it. Let me know if you see one the size of a horse wearing a crown. Okay, how about Plague Rats? Anyone heard of those?"

He got nothing but blank looks. Bosco raised his hand. "Night Cleaner, sir, are they similar to Dire Rats? I've fought those."

Rain sighed. "Call me Rain, please, or I'm going to call you Costanza." *I can't take this guy seriously at all.*

"Cos...ten..sa?" Bosco said, struggling with the unfamiliar phonemes. "Why?"

Rain laughed, then shook his head. "You wouldn't get it even if I tried to explain. Anyway, if a Dire Rat is a rodent of unusual size, then yes, a Plague Rat should be similar. Don't let them bite you. They carry disease, but I can deal with that. How do you normally deal with Dire Rats?"

Bosco nodded to his spear. "With my Mercy."

Rain fought down another laugh. He didn't want to offend the man after he'd said it so earnestly. *Of course, he named his spear. Damn it, we're all going to die, and I can't even work up the will to worry about it anymore. This party is a joke.* "Okay then. Anyway, those two should be most of what we find in the Forest. The real danger is the sink pits. It's not like quicksand, and you won't float. They suck you down, but it's slow and steady. If we're in

combat, try to stay on ground that we've already checked. If someone falls in, don't panic. Get back, then throw them a rope. Who brought rope?"

Not a single hand was raised. Rain sighed again, reaching into his pack and pulling out two coils of rope. He handed one to Arlo, and the other to Kettel. "You two are on rope duty. Also, always bring rope when you go into a dungeon. That's like the basics of the basics."

"This is excessive," complained Arlo, drawing his rapier and swishing it through the air. "Let's go. Glory awaits!"

Rain ignored him. "Stay away from the trees. There's a thing called a Fungiform Strangler that, well, it's in the name. If one drops on you, get your hands up to protect your neck before it gets its tentacles around it. I should be able to tell if there are any around, but it pays to be cautious. They are more common in the Bog, but still. Always remember to look up."

He heard a snort from Velika and turned to look at her. She was smiling. "Very good. Now, can we move this along?"

He nodded, turning back to the others. "Okay, form up. I'm in front, Bosco, you're here, and Breggeh, you're on my other side. Arlo, next to Breggeh. She'll cover you with her shield, and you can strike back at anything that comes from that side with your rapier. Kettel, you're by Bosco. You two have reach, so try and keep things back. Rina, you're in the back. You're sure you don't want to borrow my knife?"

She shook her head. "My bow is all I need."

Rain gestured with an empty palm. "And when you run out of arrows? How many did you bring?"

"Fifty," Rina said. "Durability enchanted, each one. They won't break. Slime acid won't hurt them either."

Rain sighed, then nodded. "We will have to make sure to recover them after each engagement. Don't take a shot if it looks like you'll lose the arrow. The Forest is more like a winding path through a swamp. There's lots of open water off to the sides. No, I don't know what would happen if you tried to swim off the path. You'd probably just hit an invisible wall or something. I suggest you don't try it. If an arrow goes in the drink, it might as well be gone."

"And me?" said Samson. "Rearguard?"

Rain nodded. "Yes, but be ready to switch out with any of the others if they get injured or need a break. Your first priority is to keep anything from getting to Rina since she doesn't have a melee weapon. How good are you with that sword?"

"I am the best," Samson said with a grin. *Oh no. He's like the others after all.*

"Not likely," said Velika, her hand resting on the hilt of the Odachi at her hip. "I'll bail you idiots out when it looks like you're about to die. Just scream like a baby when you need me."

Rain smiled, then turned to look out of the door. *Somehow, the lair doesn't seem so dangerous anymore. The real terror is on our side.* He looked back at the others. "What are you all standing around for? I said form up. We move slow, we move smart, and we move silent." He retrieved the Quickstaff from where he'd tied it at his belt and extended it with a flick of his hand.

"Wait, a stick?" Arlo said in disbelief. "You fight with a stick? Like the peasant? Where is your sword, man?"

Rain sighed. "I don't have a sword, and this isn't just a stick. It's a magic stick."

"Bah," Arlo said. "And I thought you were a warrior."

Kettel laughed, grinning at Arlo. "Rain here's a mage. And he don't so much fight as just win. Without even liftin' a finger. Saw 'im do it ta a big pack o slimes. Ran at em and burned em all up, like that" He snapped his fingers. "They just sorta explode. I should o known ye'd not see past the armor. It's obvious. Ye ain't been payin' much attention, have ye, ye daft clod?"

Arlo swished his rapier, then pointing it at Kettel and fell into a dueling stance. "Watch your tone, street trash!"

"Bring it, bitch face!" Kettel shouted, raising his staff.

"Enough!" Rain shouted, using a pulse of Refrigerate with Operation Heatsink settings. The lair didn't resist temperature change the same way it did being cleaned, so the oppressively hot air instantly exploded into a snowy cascade of flakes as the moisture froze right out of it. He spun to look at the shocked faces of the unawakened. Velika broke out into roaring laughter, shattering the silence.

He spoke loudly, trying to ignore the Citizen and doing his best to loom. "This is not a game."

Kettel looked queasy. His eyebrows and hair were rimed with frost. "Fuck, Rain. I didn't know ye could do tha' without... How ain't we dead?"

Rain turned on his heel, whipping his cloak around him against the chill, then stepped through the door.

---

It was slow-going at first, but the group soon got the hang of moving through the treacherous terrain. The ground was soft and peaty, the gnarled roots of trees sticking out from the ground not doing much to stabilize it, merely presenting a tripping hazard. There were thick thorny bushes and other bits of ground clutter as well. There was no path, but the way forward was easy to find, even if it wasn't easy to follow. Melka had said that there would be no need to cross open water in the Forest of the Drowned, so just by sticking to dry land, they could find the way to the next area. Rain was using his staff to feel for sink pits in front of them, mostly for show. Once he'd found the first one, he'd been able to tune Detection to find others.

The forest itself was as silent as the grave. There were plants, but no animals, not even bugs. Melka hadn't mentioned this particular detail, but he guessed that it was because it was a lair, not a natural environment. He only had two examples to go on, though. It might be possible for animals to live in here, given the plants, but he'd need more data. The dark-aspect Everdeep Fortress hadn't exactly been the kind of place in which you'd expect to find wildlife either.

Scans for entities returned nothing other than their party, even when he used the highest possible power. Doing that outside would have overwhelmed him with all the signals coming from rats and bugs and such. A scan for plants indicated that the mossy trees were real, as well as thorny underbrush.

*If plants can live in here off the fake sunlight, why can't animals live off the plants?* He shook his head and set the question aside. They were in a lair, not out for a pleasure stroll. He had to stay on task.

After a few minutes, one of his pulses returned a signal coming from straight ahead. A second pulse with more specific criteria confirmed that it was the same slime he had felt earlier. Well, *a* slime, anyway. He wasn't sure it was the same one, but it seemed likely.

He said nothing, watching for other dangers as they approached the monster. He wanted to see how the others would deal with it on their own. Rain kept walking as the slime slided its way out from behind a fallen log ahead of them. It was the same greenish-brown color as the ones in the sewers. As soon as he recognized it, a red bar popped into existence above its head, indicating its health. *Humm, I'm not sure if the unawakened will be able to see that... Shit, I told them they'd see the lair's party display earlier. I'm not sure that they'd be able to see that either. I never did ask Stint.*

"A slime!" Arlo roared. "Our first foe appears. A pity that it will prove no challenge for us. My Lord Rain, I will smite this foul creature, just say the word."

Rain shook his head. "Not a lord. Stay in formation. When you see one, always expect more."

"Nasty things," Breggeh muttered from his right as they approached.

The slime locked on to them and started moving forward. He prepared to swat it out of the air with his staff in case it lunged at him, but that proved unnecessary. An arrow speared into the slime after flying past his shoulder, poking a hole in its membrane and causing its liquid insides to spill out. Half of its health vanished instantly, the rest quickly draining as the nasty

fluid gushed out of the hole to sink into the soil. As far as the system was concerned, he'd had nothing to do with it, listing 0% contribution.

"First blood," said Rina, "or first sludge, in this case. Slimes don't really have blood."

"Good shot." Rain said. *Praise where it's due.* "Samson, cover her while she gets her arrow back. I'll deal with the mess." Not waiting for a response, he activated Purify at full, unmodified intensity. The smell of the swamp vanished, and the remains of the slime dried out and evaporated, leaving Rina's arrow sticking half out of the ground. The effect on the rest of the area wasn't that impressive. The ground was still muddy, and the trees were still covered with moss and lichen, completely unaffected by the spell. He did note, however, that a small pool of water had gone from cloudy brown to crystal clear.

"Wow," Breggeh said. "Even the smell is gone. I mean, I heard that you had a spell like this, but I never expected it to work on monsters like that. Would it have worked if it was still alive?"

Rain smiled. "It's called Purify, and it's the best spell ever. As for what it would do to a slime, I actually don't know. I've been meaning to try that. It might kill them, or it might just turn them clear or something. I'll give it a go on the next one we see, as long as it's alone. For science."

"Whassat?" Kettel said.

"Humm?" Rain said, scanning for danger as Rina bent down to retrieve her arrow. He'd switched to Winter and compressed it to just himself, recovering quickly from his mana use. *I need to tone down the Detection spam.*

"That word, science, was it? What's that?" Kettel asked.



Rain shook his head, disappointed. The word did exist in common, but he'd only learned it from Staavo after asking him about it directly. It hadn't been in the primer on common, and it wasn't an exact translation. He'd never heard anyone else use it. "It is a process for understanding the world. You make educated guesses, then design experiments to test them. For example. Guess: Purify turns slimes clear. Experiment: Use Purify on a slime. Results: Either it turns clear, or it doesn't. Simple. Publish your findings, or refine your experiment and try again."

"That just sounds like common sense with more steps," said Breggeh.

Rain barked out a laugh. The others looked at him, confused by his reaction. "Sorry, *meme*. Anyway, it's just a simple example. Now isn't the time for me to explain. We're still in danger here." He deliberately poked his staff into a nearby sink pit that he'd been planning to lead them around, then held up the muddy end of his staff to show them. He needed to keep them on their toes. Honestly, he was surprised that the lair was giving them such a gentle introduction.

Almost as if they had been summoned by overconfidence, his next Detection pulse returned a group of signals coming toward them, and quickly at that. They weren't slimes. His ears picked out the rustling of the underbrush as the unknown monsters approached.

"Tighten up." He said. "I hear something coming. More than one. Be ready."

They didn't have to wait long. A pack of large black rats burst out of the underbrush, heading straight for them. There were around ten of them, each around the size of a house cat. They had patchy coats of matted fur with diseased-looking bare skin showing through. The rats moved like a school of fish, swerving around obstacles as if guided by some shared intellect.

Bizarrely, there was only one health bar for the entire group. When he focused on it, the system told him that this was a level five 'Plague Rat Swarm.'

*Shit, here we go.* Rain set his feet, falling into the defensive stance Val had shown him. He activated Force Ward, setting the intensity to block exactly 100% of physical damage. Refrigerate would likely do a number on the rats, but he didn't want to mangle his companions, and Velika had said not to coddle them. This would be the real test.

The rats broke off to the side, trying to circle around them, but Bosco wasn't having any of that. He lashed out with his spear, skewering a rat and shaving a sliver off of the shared health bar of the swarm. Kettel swung with his staff, but the rats darted away, tumbling over each other.

"Haa!" Arlo shouted, breaking formation and running at the rats.

"Damn it, Arlo, stay on your side!"

Arlo ignored him. "Ha HAH!" He lunged for the rats and even managed to hit one with a jab from his rapier. It squealed in pain and collapsed. The remaining rats leapt for his face, but he was already gone, dancing backward with light steps. "Nonsense," he said, looking at Rain.

"Formations are for the weak. I will deal with this myself. Just watch."

Not to be outdone, Kettel likewise broke formation and started whacking at the rats with his staff. He chased after them, sending them flying whenever he connected. An arrow thudded into the ground by his foot.

"If I hit you, it's your fault!" Rina said, drawing back for another shot. "Stop moving."

"Something else is coming," Breggeh said from his right, pointing with her mace. "A big one. No, two."

Rain looked, then swore. He'd thought all of the signals had just been the swarm, but clearly, that wasn't the case. Two more monstrous rats had burst out of the bushes. Each had its own health bar, and the system identified them as level six 'Plague Rat Trundlers.' They looked like the smaller rats, just scaled up to the size of black bears. One of them was heading directly for Arlo, the other at the remains of the formation. Breggeh raised her shield, staying at his side and turning to face the rapidly approaching threat.

"Arlo, behind you!" Rain shouted. That was all he had time for before the Trundler was upon them. He swung his staff at it with full force. The metal pole caught the rat straight in the face, but it barely reacted, barreling into him. Its teeth scrabbled against his armored forearms as he fought to remain upright, failing to do anything against the metal. Breggeh stepped forward to flank it, then started pounding at it with her mace. The rat screeched, turning to face her, but Rain got its attention again with a full-bodied punch from his gauntleted fist. He'd had to drop the staff, the rat being right on top of him.

Again, the rat barely reacted to the hit. It seemed more angry than hurt. *Shit, they've got physical resistance. Its health has barely moved.* Suddenly, an arrow sprouted from the rat's eye, and it fell back with a bellow of pain, clawing at its face with its paws. Blood and the ruins of its eyeball dripped down its face as it scrambled back, roaring at them in outrage. It didn't sound like a sound that a rat would make, it was too deep, but then again, it *was* the size of a bear.

Another arrow followed the first. To Rain's astonishment, it found a home in the rat's other eye, despite the fact that the monster was thrashing around wildly. *Damn, maybe she is as good as she says she is.*

Breggeh moved forward, shouting as she pummeled at the creature with her mace. Each hit shaved off a tiny sliver of health, and the rat reacted more and more to each one, writhing and whirling as it tried to fend off the unseen attacker. Both of its eyes were completely ruined, but it was still a powerful threat.

Rain quickly checked on the progress of the others. Kettel and Bosco were almost done with the swarm, but he saw a third Trundler headed their way, coming from a different direction. Arlo was dancing around the one that had gone after him, seemingly unhurt. The beast had been poked full of holes, and its health was even lower than the one Breggeh was currently wailing on. *Wow, okay, I guess he's fine.*

Samson moved forward to assist Breggeh with the first Trundler, and Rina was drawing back another arrow, trying to find a shot. They seemed to have it under control, so he retrieved his staff and dashed forward to assist Kettel and Bosco. Seeing that Kettel had just batted away the last of the swarm rats, he decided to risk a burst of Velocity, just on himself. *Jump good!*

He shot forward, leaving magical wisps of wind in his wake. *Shit, I might have overdone it!* He managed to get Force Ward back up just as he crashed into the rat like a train. He felt a small drain on his mana as the spell absorbed his accumulated momentum, but the rat had no such magic to protect it. He heard bones break and saw a large chunk of its health bar disappear as it went down under him.

Bosco stabbed it in the neck with his spear, killing it instantly. "Taste Mercy, vile beast!"

A chime sounded as it died, followed by two others in quick succession. There was a delay, then the thwip of an arrow and a final chime, signaling that the battle was over.

The forest was silent, save for the thundering of blood in his ears and the sound of Velika's raucous laughter.