

099: Calm

"There you are," Uman signed. Rain had just left Velika's estate, and the man had clearly been waiting for him for some time. "She didn't kill you, eh? I was starting to get worried."

"What are you doing here, Bubbles?" Rain signed back as he approached. 'Bubbles' was the sign that Uman used for his name in common hand code. While that was hilarious, Rain didn't even smile as he made the gesture. He wasn't in the mood.

Uman shook his head. "Your pinkie is wrong," he signed, then spoke aloud, using his hands to illustrate Rain's error. "'Doing' is this, not this. What you said was 'what are you do here?'"

"Oh, sorry," Rain said, coming to a stop in front of Uman. "What are you doing here?" he signed, correctly this time.

Uman smiled. "That's better. I've never seen anyone learn so fast. As for what I'm doing here, I've got a message for you from outside." He paused. "Did you get all that, or do you need me to repeat it aloud?"

"I got it," Rain signed. "What message?"

"Uh-huh," Uman signed. "You *sure* you got all that?"

"Yes," Rain signed, a flicker of irritation crossing his face. His headache was out in full force, and his conversation with Velika hadn't exactly left him with an overabundance of patience.

"I'm not convinced you got it," signed Uman, grinning at him. "Think you can sign it back to me?"

"Now isn't the time, Uman," Rain said aloud, dropping his hands. "I appreciate your efforts to teach me, but I've got more important things to worry about at the moment. Just say it aloud."

Uman laughed and spoke, still accompanying his words with his hands. "Sure thing, bossman. You'll never learn if you don't practice, though, even with that freaky brain of yours. Your signs are sloppy, like my voice."

"The message, Bubbles," Rain said. He took off his helmet and held it under his arm so he could properly glare at the man.

"Fine, fine," Uman said. "Well, first thing, I found out who that lady north of the city is. You'll never believe it. It's Lavarro. You know, the Silent, Deadly Killer?"

Rain groaned and closed his eyes, rubbing his aching forehead with his free hand. *I knew it.*
"What does she want from me?"

Uman shrugged. "Not sure she knows you exist. The message isn't from her. I just told you because you seemed interested. The message is from a woman who says her name is Ameliah. Am I pronouncing that right?"

Rain dropped his hand as a sudden thrill of excitement and surprise shot through him. "Uman, what the hell? Why didn't you lead with that?"

Uman laughed and stroked his beard. "Ha. I knew it."

"Knew what, Uman?"

"That you're in love with her. It's all over your face. I think she likes you too, kid."

Rain blinked, staring at the grinning old man. After a moment, he shook his head. "You're way off the mark there. We're just friends." *What did she say to make him think that?*

"Sure, whatever you say," Uman said, laughing. "Kids."

"I'm twenty-five, Uman. Now stop messing with me and tell me what she said."

"Yeah, and I'm sixty-seven, which makes you a kid," Uman said, grinning. "Us old folks have got to—"

"Uman!" Rain snapped, his irritation flashing almost to anger. "The message!"

Uman grinned, waving Rain back. "Fine, here it is," he said, then raised his right hand and did a perfect Vulcan salute. "She said you'd know what it meant."

Rain's frustration broke, then he laughed, relaxing. "Of course."

"Well, what's it mean?" Uman said, lowering his hand. "It's rare to see a sign I don't know."

"It means she's okay," Rain said. "She wouldn't be joking around if anything bad had happened to—" Rain closed his mouth abruptly.

"The deer?" Uman said, completing Rain's sentence.

Rain looked up sharply, a chill running down his back like ice water. "What?"

"The deer," Uman repeated. "Big fellow. Wears armor."

"Tallheart is there?" Rain said, reeling. *Why would Tallheart show himself?*

Uman shrugged. "That his name? Weird. I've never met a deer before. How the depths do you know one of his kind?"

"It's cervidian, not deer," Rain said testily. "And why didn't you mention this sooner? Any other revelations that you'd like to share?"

"Relax, Rain, you're making it too easy for me," Uman said, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Damn it, Uman, why can't you be afraid of me like the rest of the unawakened?"

Uman laughed. "You know you don't really want that. You're harmless, Rain, it's just they don't know you like I do."

Rain looked at him incredulously. "We've only known each other for a few days, Uman."

"I'm a good judge of character," Uman said with a shrug. "Fine, I'll stop playing around. Your other two friends are there too. Staavo and that orange fellow from the guild. Ameliah spelled his name for me, but I forgot it."

"Jamus," Rain said. "What else did they say?"

"Not much," Uman said. "They asked me more questions than anything. They didn't know about the Empire's army or the attack on the Watch's camp until they stumbled upon the aftermath. They were headed to Vestvall, but turned back because of the storms."

"Hmm," Rain said, thinking.

"By the way, that lady-friend of yours is surprisingly good with hand code for someone who's got working ears," Uman said, interrupting Rain's thoughts. "She's pretty, too. Makes you wonder what else she can do with those fingers of hers."

"Uman, stop talking," Rain said coldly.

Uman cackled, his fake—probably fake—lecherous grin transforming into one of honest amusement. "The bottom line is that they all want to talk to you, kid. They said they'd wait for you in the Lee. Want me to come with you to translate?"

"Hell no," Rain said. "I'll be fine on my own."

Uman snorted. "Heading over there now?"

Rain hesitated, then sighed. "No. I need to talk to Vanna first."

"Wow," Uman said. "It's that bad, huh? Serious enough to delay seeing your lady-love? Or wait, are you and Vanna—"

"It is that serious, Uman," Rain interrupted, gesturing to the building behind him. "Velika's not going to help, which is why I don't appreciate all of this teasing. I don't have the time. None of us do."

Uman nodded, his grin fading. "You're right, Rain. Of course we've got serious problems to deal with. It's just, you've gotta laugh in times like this. Otherwise, what else is there?"

Rain sighed, then acknowledged him with a tiny nod. "Fair enough, just don't take it so far. Thanks for bringing me the message, anyway. I've got another job for you if you've got time."

Uman's grin returned. "I'm retired, kid. Ain't got nothing but time!" He jumped and clicked his heels together. "I was thinking of finally learning to dance."

Rain snorted. "Go tell officer Bartum that the Watch is free to resume their control of the city. Velika says she won't stop them. She disbanded her guard, too. She's not going to help us, but she's not going to get in our way, either."

Uman's eyebrows rose, then he whistled. "What the hells did you say to her to get her to do that?"

"We...negotiated," Rain said. "Reached a mutual understanding."

Uman wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Negotiated, eh?"

"No, Uman." Rain sighed. "Just no."

On the way back to the bathhouse that had become his headquarters, Rain decided to make a quick detour. The reason for this was obvious, given the billowing bank of fog that he'd stumbled upon. Clearly, the two water mages were at work.

As he entered the fog, the temperature dropped precipitously. A film of icy water began building up on his armor as he waded through the mist, leaving it swirling behind him.

As he moved deeper, visibility dropped to practically zero. Blinding Fog required water to be cast, but the spell did more than just spray droplets everywhere. The fog was suffused with magic, keeping it concentrated and lending it the effect for which it was named. Rain could tell that this was the case from the way that the fog seemed almost drawn to his armor, though the effect wasn't very pronounced.

Now, seeing the spell at work, Rain suspected that there was a little dark-aspect mana involved. Water was commonly accepted to be a secondary aspect of Force. However, that didn't mean that water spells needed to rely *only* on Force magic. Privately, Rain liked to think of the mages who used elements like earth and water as 'benders,' for reasons that should be obvious to anyone who'd ever watched Nickelodeon.

Rain switched to Detection, guiding himself toward the center of the icy fog. There were people all around him in the mist, likely attracted by the relief that it offered from the sweltering heat that gripped the city. He did his best to avoid them, but there were still a few cries of alarm as he moved past.

There were three signals clustered at the exact center of the cloud that he didn't try to avoid. He'd guessed that two of these would be the water mages, so he headed straight for them. There was a sharp intake of breath as their outlines swam into view.

"Who's that!?" said a man, the voice vaguely familiar. "Depths! I feel..."

"What is it now?" a woman's annoyed voice said in reply.

"...L...Lord Rain?" said a third voice.

"Relax," Rain said. "Yes, it's me." He came to a stop, peering at the three figures through the fog. They were standing beside a cart that was filled with barrels.

He recognized all three figures. The two men were workers that he'd introduced himself to a few days ago. The third figure was a young woman wearing a blue and white outfit and a bronze plate around her neck. He'd seen her at the Guild before, though he never learned her name.

"Oh," said the woman. "You're Rain? How did you get through my fog?"

Rain couldn't easily read her expression through the swirling fog, so he walked a little closer.

"Detection," he said. "Utility Auras tree, tier-one."

The woman jerked. "Wait, you... I didn't expect you to actually answer that. And so specifically, too."

Rain smiled, offering her his hand to shake. "I know, right? Sorry, I don't believe I've ever learned your name."

"Cera," said the woman. She hesitated, then shook his hand. "I didn't know auras could do something like that."

Rain chuckled. "Most people take one look at foundation-tier and write them off. I'm not worried about people knowing what I can do anymore, Cera. No need to keep my secret. It's too damn useful to hide." He turned to the workers. "Nails. Arnal. Nice to see you."

The two workers nodded to him in greeting.

"...Right..." Cera said, regaining her composure. "Well, anyway, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, Rain. My brother is back at the baths, helping with the barrels. He doesn't have Blinding Fog."

Rain raised an eyebrow, then smiled. "I didn't expect you to tell me that."

Cera laughed at his paraphrasing of her words. "Fair is fair, and you did hire us. Speaking of that, I'm low on mana. Khurt said that you have some way of— Ah!"

"Essence Well," Rain said, gesturing to the blue rings that had formed around her. "Also tier-one Utility Auras."

"Huh?" Cera said, watching the rising rings, her surprise fading. "It's ranged? I thought you were going to use Infuse or something. How efficient is it?"

"Perfectly efficient, unlike Infuse," Rain said. "Though it won't be if I need to send mana faster. Just tell me when to stop." He glanced at his HUD, checking the time.

"It's kinda slow," Cera said, crinkling her nose. "What's the range?"

"Around two and a half stride at the moment," Rain said, frowning. "Again, I could make it go further, but the efficiency would drop. Or technically the speed, which means I'd need to boost it to compensate. There's quite a bit of metamagic going on."

"I see," Cera said, watching the rising rings. She didn't look impressed, which Rain found somewhat disappointing.

Damn Infuse, making me look bad. Touch-based and with a 50% efficiency, but it's twice as fast at rank one as Essence Well is at rank ten. Granted, I haven't seen a way to improve its efficiency. It isn't channeled, so Channel Mastery won't work. You'd just have to keep recasting it to transfer more mana. Now maybe if you—

"Um? Rain?" Cera said, waving a hand to catch his attention.

"Sorry," Rain said, realizing that he'd been staring off into space. "I get distracted easily. How are things going?" He gestured at the fog.

"Well enough," she said. "I never thought of using Blinding Fog like this. The cold water really makes a huge difference." She laughed. "It's good practice, but it feels weird to use it in a city. The Watch would murder me for this if they were around."

"I don't know," Rain said with a shrug. "If you warned them you were going to do it first, they might have been okay with it."

Cera laughed. "Have you ever *met* anyone in the Watch? Wait, didn't they fine you for using that cleaning spell?"

Rain shook his head. "Don't be so hard on them. There are some good ones, and they're just trying to keep the peace. Also, the fine was technically Halgrave's doing."

Cera frowned. When she spoke, there was a bitter note in her voice. "I hate the Watch. It's nice not having them around. I do miss Halgrave, though. Rankin is a total ass."

"That, we can agree on," Rain said, giving her a half-hearted smile. *She's in for a surprise when she finds out the Watch is back in control. She has a point, though. The Watch was pretty oppressive before this all started, and then they tried to pull off that stupid attack of theirs. Hopefully, things will be better with Bartum in command.*

Idly, Rain let his fingers run over the hilt of the dagger sheathed at his waist. It wasn't one of Melka's, but it still reminded him of her. *A person isn't the same thing as the organization that they're a part of.*

Bartum might have let him keep the daggers if he'd asked, but it would have been too painful to carry them around after what had happened. The blade on his belt wasn't the Skulker's Pig Sticker either. That had belonged to a dead Guilder. He'd sold it and the rest of the equipment he'd found once he'd heard the Guild's policy on looting, which was basically 'finders keepers.'

It was a perverted application of the golden rule: Don't hassle other adventurers for grave robbing if you don't want them to hassle you for it in return. He'd asked around the Guild concerning relatives of the deceased, but all he'd gotten in response were confused or even offended looks. In the end, no one had come forward to claim anything, not even the accolades. He hadn't mentioned those explicitly, but it wouldn't take a genius to realize that he had them.

Rain and Cera chatted awkwardly for a few minutes as they waited for Essence Well to do its work. Rain tried to involve Nails and Arnal in the conversation, but the workers were reluctant to speak. Rain's soul leakage probably wasn't helping, but there was more to it than that.

Cera, like every other non-Watch awakened that Rain had talked to, didn't feel anything wrong with his soul. No, the issue with the workers was far more basic. The water mage was outright dismissive of anything that they had to say on the rare occasions that Rain got them to speak at all.

Her general attitude toward the workers rubbed Rain the wrong way. It was as if she didn't even see them as people. His initial impression of her had been positive, but the longer they spoke, the more that changed.

Unfortunately, Cera's view of unawakened as something *lesser* seemed to be disappointingly common among Guild members in Fel Sadanis. She'd swept up Nails and Arnal to drag the cart of water barrels, not wanting to waste mana on Internal Reservoir if she didn't have to. That was fine, it made good sense, even. It was the *way* that she'd done it that bothered Rain. He was getting the impression that she hadn't asked for their help, but rather demanded it. The worst part was that Nails and Arnal just seemed to accept the way that Cera was treating them.

Finally, mercifully, Cera told him to stop, saying that her mana was back to full. Rain released Essence Well and switched back to Winter as he checked the time again.

Six minutes, ish. 3.56 mana per second, times 360 seconds, is 1,281.6 mana. That's less than I expected. Does she not have Intrinsic Focus? Oh, wait, she probably does, just not at max rank. Assuming she's around level five like Khurt said, she's got 60 stat points to play with. If she put 30 in Focus, 10 in Clarity, and spread the rest across the others, she'd have a mana pool of 800

and a regeneration of 200 per day, not including any Intrinsic skills. I'm positive that Intrinsic Focus and Intrinsic Clarity both get experience one-to-one with general mana use experience, so if she used 200 mana a day, ranking up Intrinsic Focus would take around—

"You're doing it again," Cera said, amusement bubbling in her voice.

Rain snorted and glanced at her. *"Sorry." I'm probably off with my guess at stat allocation. I'll think about it later.*

Cera nodded at him, still smiling. She was polite to him, at least, even if she was trying to pretend that the workers didn't exist. "Thanks for the mana. I should be good for the rest of the day. I don't do well with mana potions, and this is probably going to have the same effect on me, so I don't think I'll be coming back for more once I finish with this load." She gestured to the barrels. "I don't want a headache tomorrow. Plus, you'll probably need your mana for other things. Maybe I can come back later in the week?"

"Tomorrow," Rain said. "The headache means you are pushing yourself past your limit. The only way to improve is to work through it." *She's not fully synchronized either, it seems. Can't even handle as much as Val could. That would slow down her progress even more.*

"I know," Cera said. "The headaches really hit me hard, though. I don't want to overdo it."

"Still," Rain said, gesturing to the fog. "Tomorrow. We really need your help. Think of all the people who are benefiting from your power." He hesitated for a moment. "This fog is really something. I'm impressed."

Cera smiled and stretched like a stroked cat. "Praise me more."

Rain could tell she was just hamming it up, but there was a hint of genuine pride buried in her voice.

Got her. She'll be back.

Rain nodded deliberately. "Right, I have to go. Carry on. See you later, you two." He waved to Nails and Arnal. "If she gives you a hard time, just let me know. I'll throw her in the river or something."

"Hey!" Cera said in mock outrage.

Rain grinned at her. "I'm quite serious," he said. He turned to look at the workers. "Don't let her push you around."

Nails hesitantly smiled back, looking between him and the water mage. Arnal looked uncertain.

Cera was about to say something, but Rain didn't want to get tied down any longer, especially not in a debate about class politics. He'd already spent too much time as it was. "Keep up the good work," he said, turning sharply and walking off into the fog, wishing that he had his cloak for dramatic effect. He resolved to always take it with him in the future.

Rain did his best to avoid getting tied down as he threaded his way through the huge crowd of people surrounding the bathhouse. He kept his helmet off and a serious expression painted on his face, leaning on his soul leakage to help convince people that he was too busy to stop and chat. This got him past those who didn't know him personally, but it wasn't quite enough to get him inside unscathed.

"Oh, there you are," said someone from his left. He would have pretended not to hear, had he not recognized the voice.

"Hello, Meloni," he said, looking over at the woman. She was wearing an apron and had her graying hair tied back, likely having come here from the alchemy shop in the middle of her shift. She was also towing a barrel behind her in a handcart. He slowed down but didn't stop. "Sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"That's alright," said Meloni, hurrying after him. "If I follow you, I can get to the front of this depth's cursed line."

Rain smiled. "You're not wrong. How's Cloud doing?"

"Better," Meloni said, beaming at him. "Much better. Reason worked through the bells to finish a new batch of potions, and he gave me one to use on him. Cloud barely even needed it. He was recovering on his own, but now there won't even be any scarring. He's still tired, but he'll be back to his wild self in no time."

"That's great," Rain said, relief clear in his voice. "You don't know how happy I am to hear that. I was worried that I was too slow."

"Nonsense," Meloni scoffed, waving his words away. "If not for you, he'd have died in that alley."

"Any idea what bit him?" Rain asked. A warm, jumbled-up mix of satisfaction, pride, and modesty was tumbling around in his chest. *I'm some sort of hero, now, aren't I? I mean, I saved a dog. That makes it official.*

Meloni shrugged. "Myth thinks it was just a big rat or something, and that it happened long enough ago for infection to set in. Reason says it was a 'Beast of Toxin and Terror,' whatever the hells that means. Honestly, that man doesn't know when to give it a rest."

Rain laughed. "Yeah, he really doesn't." He came to a stop at the entrance to the bathhouse, where workers were busy distributing water and taking containers from the gathered citizens. "I'd love to stay and talk, Meloni, but I really need to take care of a few things." He motioned to one of the workers, then indicated the barrel Meloni had brought. "Fill that, Kip, would you kindly?"

"Yes, sir!" said the worker, jumping forward to take the barrel from Meloni's handcart.

"Sir, huh?" Meloni said, looking at him.

Rain groaned. "I told you not to call me sir, Kip. Just Rain is fine."

"Yes, sir!" said Kip, slamming a fist to his chest in a crisp salute.

Rain shook his head and smiled at Meloni. "You see what I have to deal with? They're doing it to annoy me on purpose at this point."

Meloni laughed. "I'm sure they are. Anyway, *Rain*," she said, emphasizing the lack of title, "I just wanted to find you so I could thank you again. I'm sorry that I called you a Ha—"

"Shh!" Rain hissed, cutting her off as he looked around at the workers. "Don't even say it. I don't need another nickname."

Meloni smiled, then winked at him. "Probably for the best. Anyway, here." She reached into a pocket and pulled out a pair of glass vials. The contents swirled with the characteristic green of Reason's health potions.

"As a personal thank you," Meloni said, offering them to him. "It's not much, but Reason said I could take them. We're actually doing fairly well now. He's got plenty of charge left in his equipment, and demand has never been higher."

Rain hesitated, then accepted the bottles. "Thank you," he said. "I was just doing what anyone would."

Meloni shook her head, still beaming at him. "That's not true, and you know it."

Rain chuckled, fiddling with the glass bottles as a memory ran through his mind. Ameliah had likely felt the same way when he'd thanked her for helping him over a month ago. With a little concentration, her voice ran through his mind. [You're giving me too much credit. I did what anyone would have in that situation.]

Damn, I really want to talk to her. So much has happened... He shook his head and looked at the bottles in his hand. He had to finish his business here first. There was just too much to do.

"Say, Meloni, before I go, question," Rain said, holding up the bottles. The glass was low quality, cloudy with imperfections. "Why does everyone store potions in glass? Wouldn't something else be better? Glass is really easy to break."

"True," Meloni said. "But metal would drain the magic from the potions. Something like wood or hide would react with the chemicals. Even pottery isn't safe, always. Glass is the easiest and the cheapest. Myth used to fortify the glass with Alchemy to make it shatterproof, but I convinced him to stop. Most people don't want to pay for it. It triples the cost."

"I'd pay," Rain said, tucking the bottles into a pouch. "Maybe have some in stronger bottles as an option. For adventurers, you know? I wouldn't want to need a potion and then find all of mine broken just because I got tossed through a fence by some monster. Oh, and maybe give people a discount if they bring the bottles back. Then, you can reuse them."

Meloni cursed. "Damn, why didn't I think of that? That is actually a really good idea." She smiled. "Myth will be happy; he's always looking for things to do. By the way, that Forceweave you ordered was finished a couple days ago. Myth said the binding of the Crysts to the wool went smoothly. I was impressed by the quality of the fabric; it's softer than Cloud, which is saying something." She smiled. "Myth really outdid himself. Mlem picked it up to take to the tailor's."

Rain blinked, having to play back what she'd just said. He'd been distracted half-way through by a sudden flash of excitement from his link to Dozer. "That was fast," he said, pushing the slime's feelings aside for the moment. He had his own excitement to contend with. *My order might be done by now, then. How long does it take a tailor to tailor something?*

"There you are," Vanna said from over his shoulder. "I need to talk to you."

Rain jumped, then pivoted to face her. "Oh, Vanna, where did you come from? I need to talk to you too. Sorry, one sec." He turned back to Meloni. "I've got to go. I'll stop by to see Cloud when I can, but no promises. Oh!" He slapped his head. "You're good friends with Jamus, right?"

Meloni nodded.

Rain grinned. "He's here. Outside of the barrier, in the Lee."

Meloni's eyes widened. "Really?" She made to dash off into the crowd, then cursed, looking at the full barrel that Kip had just rolled over to them.

"Don't worry. He's not going anywhere," Rain said, helping Kip load the barrel into Meloni's cart. "I'm planning to go talk to him and my other friends out there once I'm free. Maybe I'll run into you if you're still there. Oh, bring a notebook. I don't know if Jamus knows hand code."

"Right," Meloni said, lifting the handles of her cart. "Thank you again, Rain. Now, I've got to go, and so do you. I'm sorry for keeping him, miss...?"

"Vanna," Vanna said, her expression softening.

"Vanna, right. Nice to meet you. I'll talk to you later, Rain."

Rain opened his mouth to reply, but Meloni had already turned away and started pushing through the crowd. *Wow, I guess she really likes Jamus a lot. The way her face lit up when I mentioned his name...* Rain smiled, shaking his head.

"Friend of yours?" Vanna asked.

Rain nodded. "Yeah, I know her from..." He trailed off, seeing a sudden expression of alarm on Vanna's face as she looked over his shoulder.

"Hello, Officer," Vanna said.

"Hello," Officer Bartum said, then nodded to Rain. "I got your message. We need to talk."

"That was fast," Rain said. *Why must people keep sneaking up on me?* "I didn't expect you so soon. I'd have thought you'd want to organize some patrols or something."

"Mmm," Bartum said. "It's just me for now. It's not that I doubt your word, Rain, even through a messenger, but I want to make sure I understand what brought about this change before I risk the entirety of the Watch."

"You know each other?" Vanna said, relaxing slightly.

"Yes," Rain said. "Vanna, this is Officer Bartum. I told you about him, remember? Bartum, this is Vanna. She's something like my second in command for this," he gestured vaguely, "operation."

"Ah," Bartum said, offering her his hand. "Pleased to meet you." He turned back to Rain. "Is there somewhere we can talk privately nearby?"

"I have a meeting room," Rain said. "No fancy wards, though. It used to be a closet."

"That will do," Bartum said, chuckling. He turned to Vanna. "Perhaps you should join us. I take it Rain came here to speak with you for an urgent purpose. I can think of no other reason for him to send me a messenger with such important news, rather than come himself."

Rain winced. "Yeah, sorry, Bartum. I was planning to visit you afterward. You're right, though, it is important. Let's go. It's just through here."

Rain led Bartum and Vanna through the entry hall, then motioned them back from the door to the storeroom as he opened it. Dozer shot out and would have hit Rain directly in the face had he not been ready to intercept the slime with his arm. His link to the monster faded with distance and time, but it never really went away. He'd felt the slime's unhappiness at being trapped all throughout his negotiation with Velika as a little knot of sadness pointing vaguely in the direction of the bathhouse.

As he'd approached the building, the bond had strengthened. The flash of excitement that had distracted him during his conversation with Meloni would doubtless correlate with the moment that Dozer had realized he was back. It had taken the slime a while to connect the strengthening of the bond with his presence, which didn't come as much of a surprise. The slime's mind was adorably uncomplicated, which was a polite way of saying that it was dumber than a can of paint.

Bartum laughed as Rain struggled with the excited slime. "Still having problems with that slime of yours, eh?"

Rain grinned despite himself, trying to shake Dozer free from his arm. The feelings coming through the link were much stronger with direct contact, and he could feel the slime's happiness infecting him, whether he wanted it to or not. The monster had completely forgotten that Rain had been the one to lock him up in the first place, and was reacting like a

puppy at the sudden return of its owner. Dozer had really taken a liking to him over the past week, now showing a fierce loyalty in place of its initial curiosity and indifference.

"Damn it, Dozer, get off! I told you not to jump on people!" He swung his arm in a rapid arc, causing Dozer to lose purchase on his hand and fly through the air to splatter against the wall. The slime reformed quickly, completely unharmed, as Rain had known it would be. Dozer sloshed himself backward, preparing to leap again.

"Down!" Rain shouted sharply, pressing his will against the slime through the link.

The slime hesitated, and Rain immediately sent it a feeling of happiness. "Good slime," he said, walking over to it. He could feel its desire to jump build as he approached, and he quickly shifted his happiness to anger. "No..." he said, giving it a look. Dozer quivered, but stayed down. The monster's excitement was warring with its dubious understanding of what Rain wanted.

"Good," Rain said, laying his hand on the slime and feeding it a puff of mana. *That went much better than last time. That's promising; it means the positive reinforcement is working, and that Dozer's memory isn't so bad that he can't learn. It's just going to take a while.*

Vanna laughed, then walked over to Dozer and sat in a chair next to him. She and the other workers had grown to accept Dozer as something of a mascot. She reached down to pat the slime as if it were a cat, and Dozer engulfed her fingers immediately. "Hey!" Vanna said, fighting to free her hand from Dozer's grip.

"Just ignore him," Rain said. *I thought she would have known better by now.* "Come in, Bartum, and close the door. We need to talk. Sorry about Dozer. He'll settle down in a minute. Throw some coins on the floor, Vanna. That should distract him."

Rain sat, then steepled his fingers, trying to suppress the feelings coming from the overexcited slime. He breathed deeply, concentrating on the link. It wasn't perfect, but he'd found he could mute the feelings somewhat, though it took concentration to maintain. Once the slime calmed down, he'd be able to relax that concentration, but until then, having its puppy-like enthusiasm bubbling in his head was worse than the effort of maintaining the suppression.

Bartum took a seat as Rain battered his emotions into submission. The slime's happiness slowly drained away, leaving Rain alone with his tension and worry.

"Right," he said with a sigh once he was feeling back to normal. "I'll go first. Bartum already knows this, but Velika is stepping down. The Watch is back in control of the city."

Vanna's eyes widened. "What?! Why?"

Rain shook his head. "What I'm about to tell you could be dangerous if we don't control the narrative. I trust you both, but I want to make sure you understand before I say anything else."

"I won't tell anyone," Vanna said.

"I cannot promise the same," Bartum said, "But I will keep things within the Watch. Just a few of the senior officers, if I deem it necessary." He gestured to Vanna. "She is telling the truth, by the way. She'll keep her word."

Rain looked at Bartum levelly. "I already said I trust her." Vanna jerked her head to look at Rain as he said this, a pleased expression blossoming on her face.

Rain smiled, nodding to her, then looked back at Bartum. "That's fine, I guess. You can talk about it with the other Watch leaders, but be careful."

Bartum nodded.

Rain released a pulse of Detection, making sure that there was no one in range to overhear. The coast was clear, but he spoke softly, just in case. "Citizen Westbridge is dead, and he was the only one able to control the barrier. Velika can't lower it, and nobody else can get in. There's no help coming."

Vanna gasped, but Bartum merely raised an eyebrow. "Did Velika tell you this herself?" he asked.

"Yes," Rain said.

"Impossible," said Vanna. "It's got to be a trick. She's lying. There's no way she can't—"

"He believes it," Bartum interrupted, turning to Rain. "What makes you so sure she wasn't lying?"

"She's given up," Rain said. "She's broken." Rain tapped his forehead with two fingers. "Up here. I don't know, it's like depression, but it's more than that. She hasn't left her room for days. She knows she's trapped in here with us, and she thinks that it's hopeless."

"Hmm," Bartum said. "What you say confirms our own suspicions." He looked at Vanna, who still had disbelief painted across her face. "The usurper already controls the city. There is no benefit for her in trying to deceive us."

Rain nodded. "She only wanted to be a Citizen so they would help her raise her cap. She wasn't told that she'd be locked in here with us. Whatever game Westbridge was playing, he needed a pawn, I think. Maybe a scapegoat. Someone disposable, at any rate. Velika was talking to him for days after the barrier went up, and he flat-out told her that he was working on finding her replacement. Whether that was just some test to see how she'd cope, or if he was serious, I don't know. What I do know is that there's no point in waiting for him to come back. She felt him die through that link of theirs. Someone killed him, or he choked on a chicken bone or something."

"It could still be a trick," Vanna said. "Maybe Westbridge faked his death."

Rain shrugged. "I mean, maybe, but it doesn't really matter in terms of what we need to do about it. Velika believes he's dead, and that's that. She's not going to help us, which means we need to help ourselves. If Westbridge isn't dead, great, he'll show up and let us out when we least expect it. Otherwise, we need to get access to the artifact generating the barrier as soon as we can. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Vanna. I want you to send a few crews over to where Westbridge broke the ground and get them digging."

"I thought you said only Westbridge could lower the barrier," Bartum interjected. "How do you know that gaining physical access to the artifact will help?"

"Because Velika already tried it," Rain said. "Getting her to talk wasn't easy, but I did get some information out of her. She couldn't make heads or tails of how the artifact worked, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. It has an interface, and if it has an interface, it can be hacked. Oh, sorry, hacked means, um, accessed without authorization."

"And she gave up, just because she couldn't figure it out?" Vanna asked. "What about hammering on the barrier, or starving it of mana or something? There's got to be a way."

Rain shook his head slowly, then shrugged. Physical force wasn't going to do it, judging by the massive column of stone that formed the Lee. The weight of that much rock pressing down would be far more than they could muster against the barrier, even if the entire population spent days going ape on it with hammers.

Starving the barrier of mana could work, depending on how efficient it was and whether it had an ongoing upkeep cost, but Rain had categorically decided against discussing Velika's so-called plan for freeing herself. He was almost one hundred percent sure that she wouldn't do what she'd threatened, but the possibility still weighed on him. Her mental instability was a constant threat hanging over the city. The best thing he could do to prevent Velika from snapping would be to make visible progress toward freeing her.

"Okay then," Bartum said when it was clear that Rain wasn't going to elaborate. "I'm convinced. I'll get some patrols going once we're done here and start restoring order. You're sure she won't object to that? Did she set any limits on what we're allowed to do?"

Rain shook his head, surprised and relieved that Bartum wasn't going to press him for more detail. "None. Everyone is free to do whatever they want, as long as they leave her alone. She even disbanded her guard, though I think she only did it to get me to shut up. By the way, Vanna, if a kid named Kettel shows up and says he wants to help, find something useful for him to do that keeps him away from anything flammable." He turned back to Bartum. "Just to make sure we're on the same page, the Watch isn't going to stop me or anyone else from using magic to help the city, right?"

Bartum nodded, though he looked like he'd just taken a big bite out of a lemon. "No. As long as they don't hurt anyone, we won't make an issue of it. Incidentally, I heard about your little

stunt with Refrigerate and those looters on the bridge. You neglected to mention that the last time we spoke. That is exactly the kind of thing I don't want happening."

"Sorry, I was just trying to scare them. I wouldn't have actually done anything."

"I know," Bartum said. "But still. Be careful."

Rain nodded. "Anyway, Vanna, do we have the workers to spare?"

"Yes, and then some," Vanna said. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Rain." She reached into a pocket and pulled out a bag, sliding it across to him. "That's all the money you gave me for today's payroll. No one's going to take it."

Rain blinked. "What?"

Vanna smiled warmly. "You don't need to pay us, Rain. We know you don't have the money, and we're not blind to what needs to be done. You're better off doing whatever it is you do, not scrambling for bits. All of the crews got together and talked it over. We're all still with you, and Tarny says more are joining by the hour. I had to send most of them off on errands to keep them from getting in the way."

Rain shook his head and pushed the bag back. "But what about food and stuff? People need money."

Vanna shook her head, not reaching for the bag. "Money won't save you when you're stuck in the depths. We'll be fine. Lady Par...I misjudged, I think. She said she'd help anyone who doesn't have enough, as long as they are working to restore order."

"Wait, what?" Rain said, staring at Vanna in disbelief. "She really said that? I couldn't even get her to lower her prices yesterday!"

Vanna nodded. "I was as surprised as you were. I think it just took her a little time to realize what six weeks of food really meant. Word is out about that, by the way. It might as well be common knowledge by now. A few more of the nobles have joined Lady Par in helping us, too."

Rain blinked at her. "I...did not expect that."

Bartum laughed. "You seem to have a very low opinion of nobles, Rain. Understandable, given that they cause us almost as much trouble as the Guild does, but nevertheless. They aren't stupid, and they aren't heartless. They're just as trapped as we are."

"Yeah," Rain said. "I mean, I get that, and I hoped they'd come around, but I just expected to have to fight them every step of the way."

"Sometimes, the battle wins itself," Bartum said. "By the way, you might want to talk to Lady Summerland. I've heard that she has an interest in the Majistraal. She might know something about their artifacts that could be useful. Don't get your hopes up too high, though. Information on them is scarce and full of speculation as you well know, but she might have a credible book or two in her library."

"Really?" Rain said, still reeling as his mind tried to process the implications. "Lady Par didn't mention that."

No need to pay the workers? The nobles actually helping for once?

Vanna laughed. "Why would she, when she could tell us about the woman's sex life instead?"

"Officer Tanner also has some knowledge of modern enchantments," Bartum continued, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a smile. "It's not anywhere near the level of the Majistraal, obviously, but he's good enough to maintain the wards and such. I'll send him over to you once your people gain access to the artifact. I'm sure he'd love to look at it."

"That would be a huge help," Rain managed.

Bartum frowned. "I'd like to send some officers to help dig, too, but I'm afraid I'll need them all for patrols at first. We need to make our presence known. There might be trouble with the Guild, specifically Rankin."

"I'll get Khurt to help," said Vanna. "He should be able to keep them in line."

"The silverplate?" Bartum said, raising an eyebrow. "He's a part of this? I hadn't heard that."

Vanna nodded. "Oh, you'll be taking the Fells back too, right? Rain had me send a crew there a few days ago. They'll have blocked it off with stone by now."

"A sensible precaution," Bartum said. "We'll leave it for now. We need to be out on the streets." He turned to Rain. "Let us handle it, Rain. This is our city. You and your people focus on the water and the artifact. We'll take care of the rest."

Bartum paused, stroking his beard. "Hmm. I need to think up some reason to explain why Velika is letting us retake control. As you said, we have a narrative problem." He got to his feet. "A difficult puzzle. Of course, the fact that she's trapped with us will all get out eventually, but the longer we can prevent that, the better. We want the city to stay calm." He nodded to

himself. "Before I go, is there anything else you need? We're not as strong as we were, not without our sentinels, but you have our support for as long as we have yours."

"I..." Rain hesitated, then looked between Vanna and Bartum. He could feel all of his pent up stress and worry crashing down on him like a wave, making it hard for him to speak. The nobles deciding to help, the Watch retaking command, Vanna and the others offering to work without pay, his fears about his soul, it was all too much. He'd been running himself ragged every day for days on end, and he'd had to fight for every last step of progress. Now, the work that he'd started was finally starting to maintain its own momentum, to accelerate, even, like a boulder rolling downhill. He felt tears of relief welling up behind his eyes, and he had to take a deep breath and fight to control his expression. "Thank you. Both of you."

"Of course," Bartum said.

Vanna reached out and grabbed his hand from where it was lying limply on the table. "You don't have to do everything yourself, Rain."

Rain looked down at her hand covering his, not trusting himself to speak.

Dozer ruined the moment.

The slime launched itself up onto the table, fixated on Vanna. Rain had lost control of the link, and his emotions had leaked through. The slime couldn't process the complicated feelings that Rain was experiencing, and it had decided that he had been attacked and that Vanna was the perpetrator.

After the ensuing chaos had died down, Rain was secretly relieved. No real harm had been done, and Dozer's intervention had saved him, though not from the threat that the slime had perceived.

Ameliah shot to her feet as she spotted Rain walking through the south gate of Fel Sadanis. She'd been sitting near the barrier on-and-off all afternoon, wrapped in her warm white cloak against the chill. Even in the shelter of the Lee, it was bitterly cold. The ground was hard with frost, though it had been cleared of the deep snow that had swallowed the rest of the world.

There he is. What took him so long?

"He's here," Ameliah said softly. Tallheart, who was sitting nearby with his eyes closed, opened them and pivoted his antlered head to follow her gaze.

"Mmm," he rumbled. "Why does he have a crystal slime?"

Ameliah shrugged, not having missed the small monster trailing after Rain as he approached unnaturally quickly. Wisps of wind swirled after both of them, showing that Rain was using his Velocity aura.

"He is a tamer now?" Tallheart said, smoothly rising to his feet. The large cervidian was wearing his magnificent armor as always, with not so much as a cloak as a concession to the cold.

Ameliah shook her head. "I don't think so. He wouldn't have had the skill points. I'll ask him about it, just to make sure. By the way, you should really learn hand code. It isn't that difficult."

Tallheart frowned, the expression barely perceptible on his stony face.

"I'll teach you later," Ameliah said, smiling. Neither of them had any doubt that Rain would have learned hand code by now, of course. He'd said he was going to the last time that she had spoken to him. That was ten days ago, and it was Rain.

Ameliah looked over her shoulder toward the fires, set deeper within the shelter of the Lee. Staavo and Jamus were seated near one of them. The two of them were much less tolerant of the cold and had retreated to the warmth when it became clear that Rain wasn't going to immediately rush over. She waved to them, but they didn't notice, probably locked into the same inane argument that they had been since she'd found them in the forest.

Looking back at Rain, she blinked. He was already much closer than she'd expected. *He's gotten faster.*

She watched with some amusement as Rain crashed into the barrier right in front of her, having failed to stop his momentum in time. The muddy ground hadn't done him any favors. Unlike the shattered terrain outside, Fel Sadanis looked more or less the same as it had ten days ago. It seemed that Rain hadn't been successful with his cooling project.

A flash of white light appeared as Rain picked himself up and cleaned the mud off with Purify. He was wearing the armor that Tallheart had made him, including the helmet, as well as his full black cloak. He waved to them, then removed the helmet, revealing his face.

Ameliah blinked. *He looks good. His face is thinner, and with the beard and the shorter hair...*

Rain grinned at her sheepishly, making a show of brushing himself off even though he was already clean. "Oops," he signed.

"Tell him, 'that is one way to stop,'" Tallheart said, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes.

Ameliah laughed. "Tallheart says that is one way to stop," she signed.

"I missed you," Rain signed slowly. "Both of you. Soup and books, too. So much has happened."

"What did he say?" Tallheart rumbled.

Ameliah tilted her head. "He said he missed us, then something about soup and books. I'm not quite sure what he means. Hang on. I might have misinterpreted." She looked back to Rain, signing and speaking out loud for Tallheart's benefit. "We missed you too, Rain. What do you mean, 'soup and books'?"

Rain pointed toward the camp situated under the Lee and then signed quickly, his motions much more practiced as he used phonetic signs to spell out a pair of names.

"Oh," Ameliah said, then laughed. "He named Jamus and Staavo. Spelling out a name takes time with signs, so people usually take a word or two as their callsign, to make things faster." She glanced at Tallheart. "Yours is easy. It's still Tallheart."

Tallheart nodded. "Soup and Books..." He nodded. "He has chosen well."

"Tallheart says your names for them are good," Ameliah said, signing the same thing slowly. It had been a long time since she'd learned, and she was rusty. She felt a little better about it, seeing that Rain was also far from perfect. He clearly knew the signs, but was having trouble forming them, his hands moving awkwardly.

"What is your name?" Rain signed, Ameliah repeating his words for Tallheart.

"You don't have one for me?" she responded, smiling.

Rain smiled back. "Since you know hand code, I think you already having one. Mine is 'Rain,' obvious." The sign that he used for 'rain' was one of several. The one he had used meant a warm, cleansing rain in spring. Knowing what Rain's name meant in his native language, Ameliah agreed with his choice.

"Hello, Rain," she signed, following the traditional pattern. "I am Tiger Eye."

"Tiger Eye," he repeated the sign. "I don't know that word."

"It is a brown and gold gemstone," Ameliah said, motioning to her face. "For my eyes. My sign teacher chose it, not me."

"Oh," Rain signed, smiling. "It fits. Your eyes do look like gemstones."

"Thank you," Ameliah said, a bit embarrassed having repeated his words for Tallheart.

"Flatterer."

"What?" Rain signed.

Ameliah shook her head, not wanting to explain. "I like the beard, by the way. You look much less scruffy."

"Thanks," Rain said, scratching at his chin with a goofy smile on his face. He had to pause and fight off the slime, which had jumped on him for some reason.

"If you are done flirting, please ask Rain about the Vekuavak woman," Tallheart said.

Ameliah swatted at him, but the surprisingly nimble smith darted out of the way.

"What?" Rain signed, having freed himself from the slime. She set aside her own growing list of questions. Tallheart was right; they had more important things to discuss. She was happy to see Rain, but it was difficult to forget that the Lee was the site of a battle where hundreds, if not thousands of people had died.

"Nothing," Ameliah signed back. "Tallheart wants to know about the Citizen. Bubbles said that she had a fight with the Watch. Is that true?"

Rain's smile faltered, then broke as if it had been nothing more than a facade. He suddenly looked tired, grim, even. He shook his head slowly and ran a hand through his hair.

"We'd better sit down," he signed, looking up at her. "I have a lot to tell you."

"Rain, what—?" she signed, stepping forward and looking carefully at his expression. Now that he wasn't smiling, she could see bags of fatigue under his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"No," Rain signed. He took a breath and forced an unconvincing smile onto his face. "But I'm trying."