

093: Tomb

Rain was tired, both mentally and physically. Breaking up the fallen piece of archway had turned out to be a long and tedious process, even with cryofracturing. The mortar was old and hard, a challenging opponent for the blunt pitons. Additionally, he'd often needed several rounds of Refrigerate to wedge the bricks apart. That meant that he'd been forced to go fetch more water several times. The lingering effects of soulstrain had made the trek across the room feel ten times longer than it was.

It was worth it, though. He was through. He'd spent hours chipping the large piece apart, then, once it was at a more manageable size, managed to drag it down off of the pile. He'd almost crushed himself in the process, but now he was left with quite a sizable opening.

Rain reached through the hole with both arms and dragged some of the smaller bits of rubble toward him. The shattered bricks tumbled down the pile, bouncing off of his legs. Fortunately, his armor protected his toes better than any steel-toed boots could have.

He cleared out as many of the smaller stones as he could, then stood back to survey the results of his labor. There was still another large piece of rubble blocking the bottom of the door, but the hallway to the left was now open. He would be able to fit through the gap that he'd dug easily enough. It wouldn't let him get to the surface, but it gave him access to the entrance to the Fells. That was all that he'd been after. He had a job to do there.

Slowly, he walked to where he'd piled his possessions. He retrieved his helmet and slipped it on, pressing firmly to get the damaged flange to lock. His armor was scratched and scuffed from the battering it had received as he'd worked to clear the blockage. Purify had dealt with

the dust, but it couldn't do anything for the metal itself. Even his ring was damaged, scratches marring the otherwise flawless band of gold.

Rain wasn't concerned. He concentrated, sending mana into the armor. He gave it a few seconds, then deactivated Purify so the Dark Regeneration Rune could go to work. When he activated it again so he could see, the scratches and scuff marks had vanished completely. The damaged flange would take quite a bit more mana to fix, but he'd get to it eventually.

He held up his hand, inspecting the ring. It, too, had been healed. The surface of the gold shone as if it had been freshly polished. Tallheart's Subordinate Metallic Unity Rune allowed the ring to piggy-back on the armor's enchantments. If the ring was damaged significantly, he'd need to find more gold for it to use to repair itself, but it wasn't an issue for just a few scratches.

He dropped his hand with a sigh and walked back over to the door. He glanced at Dozer, making sure that the slime was still asleep, then slowly and painfully started lifting himself through the hole that he had dug.

Once he was through, he dusted himself off unnecessarily, then dropped Purify. He started using Detection to navigate through the darkness instead. All this time, he'd been being careful not to let Purify reach too far beyond the room he was trapped in, and he wasn't about to stop now. There was a good reason to wait.

He halted after a short distance, letting himself slide down the wall until he was seated. Still in complete darkness, he reached to his right, grabbing the unlit evertorch that he'd sensed lying there. He placed it on the ground in front of him, then reached into his pouch to retrieve his flint and steel.

The magical chemical that the torch had been soaked in caught easily. The flame quickly grew until the tunnel was filled with flickering light.

Rain got to his feet, muscles still trembling from overuse, then resumed plodding down the hallway with the torch in hand.

The first of the bodies wasn't far. It was a man. Sammel had been his name. Rain had never spoken to him, but he remembered his face. The officer's body was lying propped against the wall in the middle of a pool of congealed blood.

Rain stopped and knelt, activating Purify. He watched somberly as the man's body dissolved, not trusting himself to speak. There were no words that he could say that would make one whit of difference to this man now.

Once the spell had finished its work, Rain reached down and retrieved the man's bronze plate.

This was just the first of many. As Rain continued down the hallway, he stopped three more times, repeating the process for two more officers and a Guild bronzeplate. He kept the radius of Purify tightly controlled, making sure to give each of them a private sendoff.

It was the best he could do.

When he reached the antechamber, he almost fell to his knees. He'd known what was waiting for him here, but seeing it with his own eyes had a visceral impact that Detection couldn't match.

Bodies covered the floor, strewn about like broken toys. Blood and entrails were splattered across the walls and ceiling amid the overpowering scent of blood and feces. Lamida's corpse

stood out, staked to the wall through the chest by Velika's massive sword. Talasa was lying nearby, shield sliced neatly in two, along with her torso. Phoss was there as well, still holding his broken spear with one shattered arm. Rain fought not to gag as he surveyed the scene.

His gaze snagged on one particular form lying amid the carnage, and an icy hand gripped his heart. He dropped the torch and started moving toward her.

Melka. His friend.

He let himself collapse next to her body, knees striking hard against the stone. The pain of the impact didn't even reach him. Melka's dead, clouded eyes were all that he could see.

Carefully, he reached out with a hand and attempted to close her eyelids, but failed. It wasn't as straightforward as they made it seem in movies. Tears in his eyes, he laid his hand on her shoulder instead, squeezing tightly as he activated Purify.

His voice cracked as he finally spoke. "I'm sorry."

Halgrave raised his head from the conference as he heard the door open.

"Finally," said Burrik, speaking in common. "Now, can we begin?" His deep voice had a bit of a rasp to it.

"My apologies," said the man who had just entered the room. "My lateness is in no way inten
—"

"Stuff it," said Burrik, pointing at a chair. "Sit."

Halgrave grinned. Burrik the Volcano was one of only three or four people in the world who could just tell a Citizen to shut up without fear of repercussion. As the leader of the Guild, he was not only a magical powerhouse but a political one as well.

Burrik was old, looking perhaps seventy, and he had a level to match, more or less. Despite how he looked, Halgrave happened to know that the Guildmaster's real age was almost twice that. Though Burrik was a mage, he was powerfully built, with tough, leathery skin that spoke of years spent under the sun. His hair was as red as flame, despite his age, cut and styled neatly. He was wearing a plain blue Guild tunic, the same type as any desk clerk might wear. Burrik was not one for ostentatious shows of status.

On the other side of that coin was Citizen Downharrow, the man who had just entered. He practically jingled as he walked. His long black hair had been plaited through large rings of gold and silver, and his ears and nose were studded by numerous piercings.

The man's hands, however, were free of jewelry. Given the rest of his attire, the conspicuous lack of such was a dead giveaway that Downharrow was a powerful mage. Without Dislocated Casting, most spells were launched from the hands, and even so much as a brass ring would

cause enough of a disruption to make hitting a target difficult. Wands and the like could be used to guide a mage's mana and bypass this issue, but only to a point. At the level of a DKE citizen, equipment capable of withstanding the forces involved was practically unheard of.

Halgrave frowned as Downharrow took the chair that Burrik had indicated. For all that the Citizen was dressed for the part, he carried no sense of danger with him. Unlike Westbridge, this particular mage was nothing to get excited about.

Citizen Westbridge was a skilled and devious fighter, likely on par with Burrik in terms of experience, though fortunately not raw power. Downharrow looked like he'd never seen a battle in his life. He had no presence whatsoever.

Burrik grumbled unhappily as the Citizen arranged himself on a cushion. He turned to Halgrave and spoke in Zeelada. "Remember, keep your mouth shut and let me handle this. You're only here as a witness for the Guild. I can't have you doing anything stupid, like that stunt you tried to pull at the brothel in Tarrow."

Halgrave snorted. Burrik was the same as he'd always been. The incident that he was referring to had happened when Halgrave was only fourteen, and Burrik still hadn't let it go even now, over forty years later.

Burrik and Halgrave's father had been friends since before Halgrave was born, both being members of the same band of adventurers. Their team, the Rousers, had gone on to become somewhat famous. However, as most teams did, it had broken up eventually when they reached their limit. Only Burrik had managed to increase his level further since then, though he'd never said how he'd managed such an impressive feat alone.

Halgrave had gotten to know Burrik well over many years of trailing along in the wake of the Rousers. With his father dead, Burrik was the closest thing that he had to family, other than his daughter. Of the two other surviving members of the team, one was a Citizen, and the other was an asshole.

"I am forming the connection now," Downharrow said in common, interrupting Halgrave's thoughts. He turned to watch as the Citizen summoned the glassy orbs that allowed him to contact the other leaders of the DKE. It was far more than a simple mindcaster and had no limitations that he knew of. However the Citizens did it, they were all able to communicate with each other instantaneously, regardless of distance. The link was, perhaps, the single greatest logistical tool held by any government the world over.

[Citizen Magabor, is the Warden ready to begin?] asked Citizen Downharrow, telepathically.

[I am,] said a female voice. Halgrave could feel the strength behind those words, despite the Citizen's link stretching between him and the speaker. Even seated next to Burrik and being secure in his own power, that voice had his lizard brain screaming for him to run. This was Warden Vtreece, the leader of the Watch. She was, perhaps, the strongest person in all of existence. The other contenders for that title were Potentate Fecht and High King Kev, the ruler of Ter'karmark.

Vtreece and Fecht had fought each other, once.

They'd had to stop or risk the wrath of the gods. Even if you didn't believe in divine intervention, the cracks that had been left in the fabric of reality were warning enough. They had taken years to heal. Not easily was the damage limit broken, and not without cost.

"Well then, let's get going," said Burrik. "I'll start." He slid a piece of paper in front of himself and cleared his throat before beginning to read. "On behalf of the Guild, I formally apologize for the actions of a rogue member that resulted in the devastation of the city of Westbridge. I disavow any allegations that this action was taken at my command. Further, while the Guild is not in the business of issuing bounties, the criminal Lavarro is now wanted for high crimes against the interests of the Guild." Burrik looked up from the paper. "That means you're free to kill her if you think you can manage it. Based on what happened to the city, you might not want to try that in a populated area."

Halgrave gripped the table, stopping just short of splintering the wood. Several of the orbs started flashing, a polite indication that the Citizens controlling them wanted to speak. That wouldn't last. They'd begin interrupting each other in no time. For now, Burrik ignored them, looking back down at his prepared statement.

"To be clear, the Guild is not requesting aid from any external organization. We will deal with our own problems. Rest assured that I will *personally* suppress the criminal Lavarro once her location is determined. Any information you have in this regard is most appreciated."

A new voice cut in angrily as Burrik set aside his notes. [You haven't found her yet? Preposterous. You are sheltering her, aren't you?].

Halgrave blinked. He didn't recognize the speaker, neither by voice nor by his appearance, visible within one of the orbs. It was a Citizen, clearly, but not one that he knew. He had made sure to familiarize himself with all of them prior to this meeting, but this man didn't match any of the descriptions that he'd read.

[Citizen Westbridge, stand down,] said Citizen Downharow.

Ah. Halgrave nodded. They hadn't wasted any time. This was the new Citizen Westbridge. That meant they'd found the body.

"So, he's dead, then," Burrik said. He peered at the orb containing the new Citizen, then huffed in amusement. "Where'd you find this upstart?"

[Upstart?! Why—]

[Stop this pointless noise,] said the Warden, cutting him off. [We are here to discuss the assault upon Fel Sadanis, not Westbridge. Burrik, do you have any information relevant to the city?]

Burrik frowned unhappily. "Not much. We've been watching from our branch in Jarro via scrying pool since the day after the barrier went up. We saw the army appear from thin air, then hide themselves once more. It shames me to say it, but we have no idea how they got there in the first place. Even for an Illuminator, what they are doing should be impossible. Blocking magical detection with Obfuscate is one thing, but complete invisibility..."

Halgrave nodded along. Scrying was a purely visual link. The pool itself could be blocked from forming, but that wasn't what had happened here. He was confident that if he was standing above the city, his eyes would show him the same thing that their Diviner in Jarro saw in his pool. The army was invisible. Truly. There was no skill that he knew of that would have been able to do that.

"The bombardment has continued for a full day now," Burrik continued. "The spells appear to the south of the city, then strike the barrier in waves. There has been no sign of it failing. At this point, I'm not sure that even I could take that thing down. I will ask you plainly. How have you done this?"

Halgrave's eyes widened, and he shifted his gaze to Burrik. The man could level mountains. If even *he* wasn't sure that he could breach the barrier...

[It is a Majistraal artifact,] said Citizen Downharrow. [One of a kind, and single-use.]

[Lie,] said Warden Vatreece. Halgrave shivered.

Downharrow didn't react. [Truth,] he said coolly.

Halgrave immediately upgraded his assessment of the man several notches. Whether he really was telling the truth or not, responding so calmly to such an accusation from the Warden was impressive.

[You cannot lie to me,] said the Warden, [but I will acknowledge that you may not wish to reveal tactical information when you cannot be sure of who is listening. You may tell me the truth privately at a later time.]

[I have already given you the truth,] Downharrow said. [There is no other.]

[You have given me the truth that you were told. I will have the real truth, or you will not be getting *this one* back.]

[Aaah!] cried a voice Halgrave didn't recognize. [Warden, please—]

[Do not harm Citizen Magabor,] a new voice said, one Halgrave did recognize. [We will discuss this matter privately, once our business here is concluded.] It was Citizen Jarro, a former

member of the Guild as well as of the Rousers. Halgrave hadn't spoken to him for over ten years, despite the proximity of their two cities. They didn't see eye-to-eye.

[Fine,] said the Warden. [I will wait, for now.]

[Very well. I will be in contact,] said Jarro.

"Hi Jik, you old asshole, long time. You're here too, huh?" Burrik said merrily. "How are things in that little town they gave you? Happy playing mayor?" He laughed.

[Who are you calling asshole, asshole?] said Citizen Jarro, voice filled with mock outrage.

[Ahem,] said a new voice. A woman. [Are you two done? We're here to talk about rescuing my niece, not to have a social call.]

[Citizen Kallias, please,] said yet another new voice. Halgrave sighed as an argument broke out. Discussions with the DKE always ended up like this. How they could keep their country together with so many different voices was a mystery—up there with the source of the Majistraal artifact that they'd pulled out of their collective asses. It was amazing that their country functioned at all.

[**ENOUGH!**] This time when the Warden spoke, her voice stabbed painfully into Halgrave's brain like a hot knife. It should have been impossible for her to send an attack through a relayed connection like this, and yet she had done it anyway. It seemed that impossible things were today's theme. Not for nothing was Vatrece regarded as the greatest Mentalist that the world had ever seen since the Majistraal Order fell.

Burrik snorted in amusement as Halgrave and Downharrow struggled to recover. The Citizen appeared to have born the brunt of it. If the pulse had affected the Guildmaster at all, he was hiding his reaction well.

[The DKE will now share their intelligence surrounding the disposition of the Empire's forces,] said the Warden in the silence. This sparked a few cries of indignation from the Citizens across the link.

Downharrow gestured, and the clamor was abruptly silenced. [Very well,] he said, rubbing at his chest. [As the initiator of this link, I have taken the liberty of muting all others, save for Citizen Magabor so we may maintain communication with Vigilance. That said, I will remind you, Warden, that the DKE does not bow to your commands. We offer this information freely, in the spirit of cooperation. However, before I say more, I must request confirmation via a full vote. If the motion passes, I will relate our statement as previously agreed. If it is denied, I will unmute the line, at the peril of Citizen Magabor. My fellow Citizens, I remind you of the stakes, not just for Magabor, but for the war with the Empire as well. Vote now.]

Halgrave upgraded the man yet one more notch in his mind. He might not be a fighter, but he was certainly brave enough to be one. One by one, the orbs surrounding the Citizen flickered, changing color as the others cast their votes.

Eventually, Downharrow nodded. [It is decided. I will give the statement.] He straightened his back, then continued, reciting from memory. [The DKE makes no apology for the assault upon the former Watch city of Fel Sadanis. This action was taken as a preemptive measure in the conflict with the Empire of Adamant. As both the Watch and the Guild have refused our repeated requests for assistance against Fecht, we had no choice but to act decisively. The city is now the property of Citizen Sadanis and is a full member-state of the DKE. It will not be returned to the control of the Watch under any circumstances.]

Halgrave braced himself. Vatrece hadn't spoken, but he was feeling a growing sense of pressure on his mind as she made her discontent known.

Downharrow continued, heedlessly. [We will, however, be willing to provide the Watch with monetary remuneration for the lost territory. All members of the Watch and the Guild will be released upon the resolution of the conflict with the Empire. Rest assured that no member of either organization has been harmed by—]

[LIE,] Warden Vatrece interrupted forcefully, sending another spike of pain into Halgrave's skull. Downharrow cried out, clutching at his chest. He almost slipped out of his chair, barely managing to catch himself.

[We have also been observing the city from above,] the Warden continued. [Citizen Sadanis entered one of our strongholds. Some time later, a large force of Sentinels, Officers, and Guilders followed her. Citizen Sadanis returned, wounded, but alive. The others did not. There is only one conclusion.]

[I do not lie,] said Citizen Downharrow passionately, hauling himself back upright. He had recovered quickly, but his voice had a hitch in it as he continued. [As I was saying, no member of either organization has been harmed by any action *sanctioned by the DKE*. The response of Citizen Sadanis to the presumed attack on her person was her own. Further, we cannot confirm that any deaths resulted from this incident. Unfortunately, the nature of the barrier precludes long-distance communication with her. Until it is proven otherwise, it is our position that Citizen Sadanis has merely subdued those who raised their hands against her, as she has been instructed to do. If this is not the case, then the DKE will launch a full investigation after the resolution of the war. Citizen Sadanis will face the consequences of her actions at that time.]

"Nice," Halgrave said sarcastically. "Throwing one of your own under the wagon, eh?"

"You did the same," said Downharrow, raising an eyebrow. It was unclear whether he had transmitted either statement to the other listeners. Halgrave was about to open his mouth in protest but closed it after a sharp look from Burrik.

[Is this all?] the Warden sent, her tone glacial.

[No,] said Downharrow, now fully recovered. [We also request the assistance of the Watch and the Guild with the counteroffensive against the Empire. Unlike the DKE, the Empire has shown no compassion for—]

Downharrow broke off as Burrik exploded into laughter. "You can't be serious, boy. We want no part in your war. Take it as a kindness that we don't take this insult out of your hide. On that note, we're done paying taxes in your territory until our members are released. Be thankful that we don't leave your country entirely. Push us any more, and we will. We'll see how you like dealing with your own monster infestations."

[I find myself in agreement with the Volcano,] Warden Vatrece said. [Does the gall of the DKE know no bounds? You presume to request our aid after taking one of our cities? You are trying to shift the blame onto a scapegoat and buy us off? Really?] Her voice rose in intensity as she continued. [This is an utter farce. Citizen Magabor will remain here as my guest until the city is—**SILENCE, WORM!**]

Halgrave winced. The pain was muted this time, clearly directed elsewhere. As satisfying as it was to see the DKE's scheming shut down, he did feel bad for the hapless Citizen Magabor. He had probably been selected to go by vote, thus having little choice in the matter.

Downharrow attempted to respond, but Vatrece rode right over him. [The Empire is your problem, not ours. Come back to me when your cities start to fall, and you realize that returning our property is in your best interest. We're done.]

[Warden? Warden, wait!] Downharrow said. There was no response.

Burrik kept laughing, standing to loom over the distraught Citizen. "She's gone, boy. And so are you. Get the hells out of my Guild."

Rain woke with a start, canceling Essence Well to release a pulse of Detection. It came back reporting the presence of three monsters, two of which were in the room, and only one of which should have been. It wasn't his alarm that had woken him, but the pop of the monster spawning. A quick follow-up pulse confirmed that it was just another slime. Relieved, he switched to Purify. After a few seconds, a ding sounded, and he relaxed, leaving Purify running for light.

That's the third time...

Dozer had been the first, of course. The second slime had spawned when Rain had been busy sending off the dead. It had appeared in a shadowed nook like the one Velika had hidden in before. Purify had done its work, but he'd been unable to tame it. He'd left it back in the antechamber to the Fells, not wanting to sleep in the same room with a wild monster, no matter how harmless.

Rain cursed as he looked over at the burned-out evertorch on the wall. It had clearly gone out sometime in the night, allowing this latest slime to spawn. According to his HUD, it was 5:43 AM, a little over two hours before he'd scheduled himself to wake.

He hauled himself to his feet with a sigh, raising his visor to rub the sleep from his eyes.

"Dozer, come on. You did nothing. Some sentinel you are."

The slime didn't respond. It was still asleep, as far as he could tell; the strange sense of its emotions had faded away. Even without his HUD, however, he could still tell Dozer apart from the other slime, for all that they looked almost identical. The bond was clearly still there, just muted.

Rain walked over to the newest slime and offered it his hand. It engulfed it, just as the others had. He started feeding mana into it with Mana Manipulation. It released him after sucking up a hundred mana with not so much as a thank you, let alone a message from the system. Either he'd gotten incredibly lucky with Dozer, or the Tel were more important than he thought. That or there was a limit of one pet per person.

He made a note to check the third tier skills of the Monster Taming tree later. He was curious, but even if a skill to allow multiple pets did exist, he had no intention of trying to unlock it. It wasn't like he had a pile of free skill points just lying around.

No zookeeper build for me, I guess.

He watched the newest slime with mild curiosity as it oozed toward a corner. That settled it; feeding slimes made them tired, and they preferred confined spaces to sleep in. That was two more slime facts for his memoirs.

Yup, I'm losing it. I need to get out of here, and fast. He shook his head. *Well, since I'm up, I might as well get going on that.*

With a thought, Rain pulled his training dialog forward. Before he could even read it, he let out a strangled yelp. His body felt as if it was about to burst like an overripe berry. No sooner had the pressure appeared than it vanished, leaving Rain gasping for breath. An icy shiver ran down his spine as if he'd been dunked into freezing water.

Well, that was new...

Training Overview

Skill Experience Earned

Mana Manipulation: 28

Aura Compression: 52,502 [Rank Up] [Rank Up]

He blinked, staring at the dialog. He hadn't wanted to use Winter with Aura Focus overnight, unwilling to be without his senses in a dangerous environment. Naturally, he'd decided to leave Essence Meditation running instead. It looked like he'd found another flavor of soulstrain in the process. He sat down, dropping Purify and reflexively activating Winter to replace it.

Well then. I know not to do that again. Essence Meditation = Dangerous.

He shifted uncomfortably. The feeling had been extremely unsettling, for all that it had only lasted a moment. *Was that from the excess experience? I was at the cap when I went to bed, but in theory, Essence Well should have gotten me some stupidly big number. At least 170k...*

Shit, I take back what I said. Essence Meditation is insane. I'm going to need to be careful with this. I don't want to stack up so much experience that I explode into chunks the next time my alarm goes off...

With a sigh, he shook his head. *Yeah, I am totally going to do that again, aren't I? Some controlled experiments are in order. I need to know exactly what caused that feeling, so I can figure out what not to do in the future. Later, though. For now, I'll take it as a warning to give it a rest for a little while.*

He lit a replacement evertorch and got up to replace the one that had burned out. Then, he dug out a ration bar and started grinding away at it with his teeth. Neither action caused him any pain. His muscles felt surprisingly good, all things considered.

My Vigor soulstrain seems to have worn off completely. I'm practically back to normal, at least for now. We'll see how long that lasts. I think today is going to be a rock-moving day. I've got tools, now. I saw a pickaxe-thing and a few war hammers back in the other room.

Rain paused as he wrestled with his dark memories. *I need to sort through all that stuff...*

He shook his head and resumed chewing. He didn't like the idea of stealing from the dead, but at the same time, he couldn't afford not to. He'd broken all but one of his pitons, and if he was going to tunnel his way out, he'd need tools of some kind. The only things he'd taken so far were the plates—both Watch and Guild—and the accolades.

He frowned as he took another bite of the ration. Those were even more of a moral quandary than the equipment was. On the one hand, they represented a significant amount of power—once he figured out how to activate them. On the other hand, he felt like he shouldn't use them at all. They were the kind of thing that should be returned to the family of the deceased. Their legacy. Taking them for himself felt wrong, and yet...

With a sigh, he opened the pouch that he had tucked them into, then arranged them on the floor carefully.

Accolade of Ander's Copse

Accolade of the Southshore Rat Warren

Accolade of the Hoarfrost Labyrinth

Accolade of Badlands Heat Lair 3057 2 8

Accolade of Badlands Heat Lair 3057 2 8

Accolade of Badlands Heat Lair 3057 2 8

Accolade of Badlands Arcane Lair 3055 4 19

Accolade of Badlands Arcane Lair 3055 4 19

Accolade of Badlands Arcane Lair 3055 4 19

Accolade of Badlands Heat Lair 3059 9 2

Accolade of Badlands Heat Lair 3059 9 2

He'd found eleven of the small metal plates. Unlike his own accolade, the buff wasn't listed on them, only the names of the lairs that they had come from. They appeared to be entirely mundane as far as he could tell.

After a moment, he summoned his own accolade. It materialized from thin air when he concentrated on it. He placed it next to the others, then blinked the moment he took his hand away. The room had suddenly become darker, or more accurately, his senses had weakened.

Accolade of the Everdeep Fortress
+10 Perception

So I need to be touching it, then. He pressed a finger to the plate, and his senses sharpened once more. *Interesting. It doesn't seem like the gauntlet matters. It's probably a 'domain of the soul' type of thing.*

He picked up the accolade once more and placed it in a pouch. The buff remained. *Yup, it just needs to be on me. There's no point keeping it summoned, though. That's just asking for trouble.* He paused. *If I can summon it, then I suppose it means I can give it away. I wonder if there is a market for these things. There must be. The question is: why is this one bound to me, but not the others?*

He scratched at his beard, thinking. The obvious answer was that he'd earned the Darkness accolade himself, receiving it in some sort of out-of-body experience. *In-soul experience? I'm pretty sure what that was. Can I get back there?*

He pulled out the black accolade again and concentrated on it. Instead of trying to send it back to wherever it went when he dismissed it, he focused on the boundless void that he'd been whisked off to when Tallheart had broken the lair's core. *Let's see, I saw myself as made of blue light, and the surroundings were just endless swirling darkness.* His brow furrowed as he tried to will the image into reality.

After a minute, he gave up. While he could recall the scene perfectly, he remained in his body no matter how hard he concentrated. Either there was some trick to it, or he'd made a faulty assumption somewhere.

I need to talk to Ameliah again. She probably knows. It's not like there's anyone else I can ask...

He stared off into the distance, thoughts suddenly stalled. Whenever he closed his eyes, the bodies were waiting for him. He'd performed forty-nine funerals in total. The Watch had lost all eighteen of their sentinels in addition to twenty officers. As for the Guild, they lost eight bronzeplates, whose names he didn't know, and three silverplates, Feddek, Pemmin, and Olani.

Khurt, the barman, was the only remaining Guild silverplate in the city that Rain knew of, and he was refusing to hope that he was still alive. He didn't want to have that hope crushed when he found Khurt's broken body under the rubble. There were still twenty-one more corpses buried in the collapsed tunnel. If Khurt was alive, he would ask him about accolades, but if not...

Rain shook his head, forcing down his dark thoughts. He would deal with that when the time came. Worrying about it was useless.

There is one more person I could ask, I suppose. He closed his eyes, discarding the idea. While Velika would doubtless be able to tell him how accolades worked, he didn't want her to know that he had them. She'd take them for herself in all likelihood. That was the worst outcome. He was fine giving them up if they went to the families of their former owners, but giving them to Velika...no.

Rain sighed. The same problem applied to a lesser degree when it came to asking someone like Lord Rill. He needed someone he trusted. Of course, it would only be an issue if he managed to get out of here.

Looking back down at the accolade in his hand, he inspected it for anything that he might have missed. The lettering seemed to have been stamped into the front, and the back was blank. He couldn't get the text to change in any way—to show the lair's level, for example. It

wasn't like a dialog that he could manipulate. It was, for all intents and purposes, a physical object.

He summoned and dismissed it a few times, then placed it on the ground and removed his hand. He concentrated, then nodded to himself. As he'd suspected, he couldn't dismiss it when it wasn't in his possession. It looked like if someone took it from him, he'd have to get it back physically.

As for the person who took it, he was unsure whether they'd be able to use it. The fact that he couldn't use the other accolades sitting in front of him meant that transferring one probably wasn't as simple as just handing it over.

He waved his hand over the accolade, vanishing it smoothly like a magician, then picked up one of the other metal plates.

Accolade of the Southshore Rat Warren

This one came from Feddek.

Rain knew for a fact that the old adventurer had no family left. He'd overheard him say so in the Guild tavern. Feddek was—had been—a bit of a talker, to the point that some Guilders actively avoided him. He was always retelling old tales of his exploits, whether anyone wanted to hear about them or not. Rain didn't know much else about him, but he got the sense that he'd had no strong connections with anyone in the city, for all that he was always hanging around the Guild. If there was one accolade that he felt the least bad about experimenting on, this was it.

He flipped the plate over, inspecting it thoroughly. Other than the color of the metal and the different writing, it was exactly the same as all of the others. The three lairs with creative names had come from adventurers, this one from Feddek, and the other two from Olani. Pemmin hadn't had any, nor had any of the bronzeplates or officers. The rest came from the sentinels.

Carefully, Rain pushed mana into the plate with Mana Manipulation. The metal, whatever it was, drank it up eagerly. Just as when he'd tried this before, he got no feedback as he would have from a magical item. Slowly, he increased the flow. Normal metal would eventually saturate with mana, with a different capacity depending on the properties of the material. Once that happened, it wouldn't explode or anything, it would simply stop accepting more. For armor, that was bad, as it meant magical spells would suddenly become able to damage the metal itself. In the case of Mana Manipulation, he wasn't actually sure what would happen. He wasn't pushing mana into the metal; he was just expelling it nearby and letting it be drawn in on its own.

He frowned, glancing at his HUD. The plate was like a black hole. Despite its size, it had already consumed over three thousand mana with no sign that it had reached saturation. *What the hell kind of metal is this?* He tried a few pulses of Detection, checking for different metals, but got nothing.

His mana was getting dangerously low, so he stopped with a sigh. He could try again later, once he put some physical work in. His body was feeling good to go, and he couldn't afford to just sit around. He looked down at the plate, then shrugged and tucked it back into his pouch, along with the others. *I wonder... If I get enough of these, could Tallheart melt them down and make some ridiculous armor? The mana saturation would be obscene for a full set of this stuff. Hell, it might be infinite for all I know.* The corner of his mouth quirked up in the shadow of a smile. *Now, that would be just silly. It can't work like that. Maybe it's like Tel alloy*

and breaks when damaged. Needless to say, I'm not testing that one. As awesome as accolade armor would be, that's not what they're for. It's a moot point, anyway. These aren't even mine...

He shook his head and forced himself back to his feet. *They're dead, and there's nothing I can do to change it. I'll be dead too if I don't get myself out of here. I can worry about morals later.*

He pulled open his menus and adjusted the ring, setting each of his physical stats to be equal to their tolerances and dumping the rest into Clarity. The idea was to get the most out of his stats without straining himself further. If his synchronization happened to improve as he worked to move the stones, that would simply be a bonus.

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
22,749	22,750	374,832

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
HP	502	940	250/d
SP	446	520	340/d
MP	497	6,157	1.5/s

Dark Revenant's Armor

	CUR	MAX	RGN
DUR	9,753	1,309	0
SAT	0	13,202	-92/s
CHG	0	14,209	0

Attributes

139/139	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	BUFF	SYN
STR	11.3	47	10	37/37	24%
RCV	10.2	25	10	15/15	41%
END	7.8	26	10	16/16	30%
VGR	13.6	34	10	24/24	40%
FCS	10	10	10	0/49	100%
CLR	247	247	200	47/61	100%

Resistances

0/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	2.6	0%
COLD	2.6	0%
LIGHT	2.6	0%
DARK	2.6	0%
FORCE	2.6	0%
ARCANE	2.6	0%
CHEMICAL	2.6	0%
MENTAL	2.6	0%

Immediately, Rain noticed the difference. His entire body felt as light as a feather.

He took a few experimental steps, then jumped. His muscles responded quickly and easily, with not a hint of soreness or pain. It was, physically at least, the healthiest he'd felt in his entire life. The contrast from the day before was startling.

He activated Purify for light and looked down at his hands, marveling at the power that he felt at his fingertips. *11.3. So this is what it's like to be superhuman...*

He walked over to the remains of the large chunk of rubble that had been blocking the door. It was still around the size of a microwave. Needless to say, he hadn't lifted it earlier. Moving it had been more like starting an avalanche and getting out of the way as it slid down the pile of smaller stones.

Rain considered for a moment. *How much does this weigh? Shit, probably more than I do. A lot more.*

Determined to at least give it a try, he set his feet and crouched down, sliding his hands under the chunk of brickwork and settling his grip. Then, he straightened his legs and heaved. Slowly, and with great effort, he managed to get the stone up off the ground. He didn't stop until his legs were straight, and he was standing upright. He held it there for a full second before his fingers gave way and it fell with a mighty crash.

Rain swore and jumped back, scrambling to get his feet out of the way of the toppling stone. He looked up at the ceiling with no small amount of concern as the impact sent a tremor through the room. Thankfully, no collapse occurred.

He panted, both from the exertion and from the adrenaline that had just been dumped into his bloodstream. He looked down at his hands in wonder as he worked to control his breathing.

Nice work, butterfingers. Also, holy shit.

He looked at the pile, focusing on the second of the large pieces blocking his way. It was around twice the size of the one he'd just lifted. He'd need to break it up first, but with the weapons he now had access to, that should be no problem. He was in business.