

203: Truth

"None of your Guild numbers are in our records. I'm sorry, I can't let you in."

Rain fumed, outwardly calm as he accepted his plate back from the constable. "Then can you take a message to the Citizen for me?"

The constable crossed his arms. "And leave my post? I take my job very seriously."

"So send someone."

"Who?" the constable countered, gesturing around. Of course, there was no one. Rain had chosen this gate specifically for being small and out of the way.

"This is important," Rain said coldly. "Life and death."

"I'm sure it is."

Fed up, Rain gestured southward. "Empire ships attacked Three Cliffs."

"That hardly seems possible," the constable said with a yawn, making a shooing motion with one hand. "Play your games somewhere else. The Citizen has no patience for Guild shenanigans."

"I'm telling you the truth," Rain said, popping open his thigh compartment and holding up his Custodian's plate by the chain for the constable to see. "And I'm not just a Guilder. I'm a Custodian of the Watch."

"Very nice," the constable said, barely even looking at the plate dangling in front of his eyes. "Now, please move along. And before you do something stupid, know that the DKE has one punishment for Guilders that break treaty, and you won't like it. Hurt me to get in, and you're a dead man. Trip the wards trying to sneak over, and you're a dead man twice over. Citizen Barstone *really* doesn't like solicitors."

"I'm not going to hurt you," Rain said in disgust, slipping his Custodian's plate on around his neck rather than tucking it away. "What kind of asshole do you think I am?"

"The usual kind," the constable replied. "Whatever service you're trying to con him into paying you for, making up such an unbelievable story is stupid even by Guild standards. Might as well tell him you're from Wix. Force an audience with a lie, and you won't like what happens to you."

"Not a lie," Carten said gruffly.

The constable let out a tired sigh. "Fine. If you really want to commit suicide, go to the Guild and get your plate registered with the city. It only takes a few days. Then you can petition the palace staff to grant you an audience."

"We don't have a few days," Jamus said. "Did you not hear what Rain said? Three Cliffs has been attacked. First about a week ago, and then again, just last night."

"Flew here, did you?" the constable asked. "Are your arms tired?"

Rain ground his teeth. The ship carrying the first batch of refugees from Three Cliffs had left on the 27th, and despite all that had happened, today was only the 29th. Clearly, they'd outrun news of the attack. It was just...now that he had finally worked up the courage to deliver said news, they were being outright *ignored*.

Screw this.

Rain turned, his anger turning cold. "It's okay. We'll just send him a damn letter."

"It will never get to him," the constable said. "Nobody will believe a story like you're trying to spin."

"No spin," Rain said, stalking away. "By the time Barstone gets his head out of his ass, the entire city will know what's coming."

"Spreading rumors won't get you anywhere!" the constable called after him. "Nor will insulting the Citizen! Don't bother trying the other gates! If you're not on the list, nobody will—"

Rain stopped listening, composing a furious message for Ameliah. He knew he wasn't thinking properly, drained by the constant stress, the literal fight for his life, and being awake for two

days straight, but this was beyond ridiculous. He was wasting time. He'd wasted time in Three Cliffs, and all of Ascension had almost died for it. He'd wasted time gathering information in the slums just because he was so *scared* the DKE had it out for them, when in reality...

Halting sharply before he even finished composing his message, Rain whirled to see Jamus and Carten hustling after him. He slashed his hand sharply across his chest, speaking as they stumbled to not crash into him. "Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity."

"Ha!" Carten laughed. "That's pretty good. You come up with that yerself?"

"You're not the first person to ask me that," Rain said, turning again and resuming his furious march. He summoned his keyboard just so he could angrily slam the enter key to send off his message.

"You know," Jamus said, hustling to fall into step beside him. "I would have thought Barstone would put that fleet of his to some use other than looking impressive. I'm starting to think we could have just sailed on by."

"Probably," Rain said. "Still need food, though."

"That where we're goin' now?" Carten asked from Rain's other side. "Ta get food? Or are we gonna try the Guild?"

"Watch first, then Guild," Rain corrected. "They can actually recognize the truth when it's dancing a jig on their doorstep."

"Hopefully," Jamus said. "Is it not supposed to be a small outpost, though? Would it not be faster to simply warn the entire city as you warned the tavern keep? It's not a rumor if it's true. We could split up, even. You go to the Watch while we head to the Guild and get things started. If you want gossip to spread, the Guild is the place to go."

"Never split the party," Rain said. The last thing he needed was to have to track down his friends after they got themselves in more trouble than they could handle. He'd only been half kidding when he'd asked how he'd gotten stuck with them—stuck *protecting* them.

It should have been Ameliah. She would have been able to look after herself in a fight, or more practically, get them away with Airwalk if it looked like a fight would be necessary. While the treaty said Barstone couldn't outright attack Guilders, he *was* allowed to detain them for violating his rules, no matter how minor. As silverplates, he and Ameliah had some protections against that, but bronzeplates like Jamus and Carten could be detained for as little as breathing too loudly. In practice, such a frivolous charge would never be raised, but the point stood. Having them along was a liability.

The council heads just couldn't let me go alone like I wanted. And nobody who actually KNOWS the DKE could come because Velika didn't 'trust' them. Idiocy! She trusts Carten of all people not to blab, but not Ameliah? What a crock of shit!

The walk to the north end of Hightown was uneventful, giving Rain some much-needed time to calm down. Asking a furniture merchant for directions, Jamus got them on the right street, but before they actually found the Watch outpost itself, the Watch found them.

"Ah, Guilders!" said a man sitting beside a faded awning, springing to his feet, then hefting a wooden box before hurrying over to them. Rain had a moment to take in a wrinkled face and a loosely-tied shock of white hair before the box was in his face. "Please, Guilders, anything you can spare for the broken and the destitute? Tel, perhaps? Or an old cloak or some gloves? This city gives them nothing, and even a little will help to...help to... What is...? Is that what I think it is?"

As the man retracted the box, Rain saw that his eyes had locked onto his Custodian's plate, going wider by the moment.

"Hello, officer..." Rain said, eyeing the man's own plate in turn, affixed somehow to the front of his heavy lamellar hide jacket.

"C...custodian!" the officer stammered, missing the implied request for his name. He straightened, almost dropping the box in his haste to put his hand on the hilt of his sword in salute. "Sir!"

Rain blinked. Nominally, he was outside the Watch's chain of command, but clearly, this fellow didn't think so. The combination of his steely Custodian's plate and his silvery Guild one seemed to have been enough for the officer to mistake him as his superior. Rain decided it

would be easier to plow on rather than to correct him. "I'd like to speak to the sentinel in charge of the outpost, please. Can you take me to them?"

"I, uh, sorry, Sir Custodian, but we don't have a sentinel. It's just the three of us."

"Please call me Rain," Rain said, hiding his shock. *Only three of them?* "Can you take me to the outpost anyway? We need to talk."

"Ah, yes, Sir, you've actually already found it. Please follow me inside." Still struggling with the box, the man led them back over to the faded awning, passing through the door beneath it and into a small, cluttered office, dimly illuminated by the light filtering in from the street. At their entry, a young woman about his own age looked up from a desk, then did a double-take. Before Rain could open his mouth, she was rushing over to them.

"What happened to you?!" she demanded, staring not at Rain's helmet, but at his chest.

"You're all... What... What are those lines?"

"You see something?" Rain asked, glancing at the older officer, then back to the woman, nudging his mental assessment of her age down by a year or two. She had short black hair, and like the older officer, had somehow affixed her bronze plate to her jacket. It wasn't armor in her case, but rather a woolly sheepskin coat that looked entirely too warm to be comfortable in anything short of a blizzard.

"Sana, please, show some respect," the older officer said, scrambling to find a place to put down his box. "Sorry, Custodian. She gets like this. Never been much good at Reading, myself,

so I can never tell what's going to get her worked up. Can I offer you anything? Perhaps something to eat?"

"You're so bright!" Officer Sana continued, ignoring him. "And so...so blue! But the veins... Are those cracks?"

"Sana!" the older officer shouted, but Rain held up a hand.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"You're like...glowing marble," the young officer said, looking up to meet his eyes. "Glowing blue marble, but with dark veins of black running all through." She blinked, as if only now noticing his helmet. Her eyes flicked to his Custodian's plate, then back up again. "Wow. You really are a Custodian. They said in training that I'd know when I checked the plate, but..." She abruptly took his hand, and with Tactile Transference enabled, Rain could feel her concern as she squeezed his fingers. "Never mind that. What happened to you?"

"You were right with your guess," Rain said, gently freeing himself from her grip. "I cracked open my soul by mistake. It took me a long time to figure out how to put it back together."

The woman mouthed the word 'wow,' again staring at his chest.

"Marble, huh?" Rain asked. *Interesting.* "Lots of veins? Not just one big fissure?"

Sana nodded, still staring. She reached out and placed a hand on his breastplate, splaying her fingers widely.

I guess that's just how she perceives the damage. Why is she touching me, though?

Rain cleared his throat loudly, causing officer Sana to squeak and hop back.

"Sorry," she said, wringing her hands and straightening herself up. "I should have asked first. Contact helps me get a clearer view."

"It's okay," Rain said, turning to the other officer and finding him awkwardly holding a tray of scones. "You said there were three of you?"

"Officer Fields just went down to Northshore, Sir," the officer said, extending the tray. "There's a rumor of something odd out in the harbor. A huge chunk of ice or something."

"The iceberg's with me," Rain said, glancing at the tray. "I'm not that hungry, thank you."

"I am," Carten said, reaching past Rain to snag a pastry. "Right starvin'."

Rain rolled his eyes. "I have important news. The Empire has ships capable of navigating past the Badlands. They've taken Three Cliffs."

The intake of breath from the female officer was immediate. "T...t....true!" she stammered.

"You can tell?" Rain asked, arching an eyebrow. "I'm not too strong for you? Other officers have had trouble before."

"Officer Sana has always been good at Reading, Sir," said the older officer. "It's how she got herself stationed here. Beat out one too many sentinels at nine dice while she was in training."

"Is that so?" Rain said, looking at Officer Sana speculatively. *The sentinels play nine dice? It would be a pretty good way to practice Reading, I guess. And to teach yourself to defend against it. Not important right now.*

Still visibly shaken, Sana licked her lips, staring at him in disbelief. "No, you're right. You're strong, so it's really tricky..." She moved closer to him, raising her hand but hesitating this time. "Can I?"

Rain nodded, disabling Tactile Transference this time as Sana pressed her palm against his chest once more.

"Say it again," she commanded.

"The Empire attacked Three Cliffs," Rain said, cramming the words with as much honesty as they would hold.

Apparently, it worked.

"True!" Officer Sana cried, pulling her hand back like she'd been burned. She slumped down on a nearby chair, displacing a stack of papers. The older officer was clearly shaken too, the tray of scones in danger of slipping from his grip. Fortunately, Jamus rescued it in time, setting it atop the collection box.

Rain gave them a moment, then politely cleared his throat and addressed Officer Sana once more. "If I give you all of the details, can you write up a report and bring it to the Citizen's palace? I already tried going there, but they—well, one guy at the gate—didn't believe me. I figure it'll be faster if you help me."

"Yes... Yes, I can do that," she said, still staring at him in horror. "The Citizen's people don't like me, but I should be able to get them to listen....if... Hang on, I need to make extra, *extra* sure." She stood, slapping her hand flat on his chest for the third time, then pointing sharply at her older companion. "Say Officer Mattem is younger than I am."

"Officer Mattem is younger than you are," Rain said, giving the man in question an apologetic shrug.

"No, no, no, you need to *mean* it," officer Sana said. "You need to actually try to deceive, or I won't be able to tell. Damn, I need a better question. Um..." She chewed her lip, then snapped her fingers, scooting even closer to him and pointing at their feet. "How many people could you kill without moving from this spot?"

"I...uh..." Rain looked down at the top of her head. "That's a little dark, don't you think?"

"Wow, okay," Officer Sana replied, cutting him off, still staring at his chest. "You don't need to answer. I got enough of a flicker. Just to be clear, though, you don't actually want to kill anyone in the city, do you?"

"Of course not," Rain said, again trying to will honesty into his words, though he left off the qualification to his statement that had popped into his mind as he spoke it.

"Truth," Sana said slowly. She craned her neck to look up at him seriously, trying to peer through her visor. "But there's a but." She looked down at his chest again, then made a rolling motion with the hand not currently touching him. "Of course not, but..."

Rain hesitated, then spoke the whole truth as it had come to him. "I don't want to kill anyone, but I will do whatever I have to to protect myself, my friends, and as many innocents as I can."

"Okay, great," Officer Sana said, suddenly laughing nervously as she stepped away, removing her hand. "That was clear enough, and also the absolute right answer." Her smile lasted a moment more before shattering like glass. "But that means... That means..." She slumped down on the chair again. "Leeka give me strength. The Empire really sailed past the badlands?"

"Yes," Rain said. "Not with literal sails, but yes, they traveled past them. Their ships are like the Bank's, powered by journey cores and able to go over deep water somewhat, being made from metal and shielded against Divination. Each one is large enough to hold about a thousand soldiers, and we've seen three of them so far. Do you want to write any of this down?"

"Yes!" Officer Sana squeaked, popping up and rushing for her desk. "Just wait there!"

Rain turned to look at Officer Mattem but had to pause to shoot Carten a glare. The big man had another scone in his mouth and yet more grasped in both hands, having moved over to where Jamus had placed the tray. Seeing he'd caught Rain's attention, Carten gave him a look as if to say, 'what?'

Rolling his eyes, Rain turned back to Officer Mattem, then addressed him as he'd intended.

"You don't happen to have a mindcaster here, do you?"

"No, uh," Mattem managed, looking like he would benefit from using the chair Officer Sana had just abandoned. "No, we don't."

"Darn," Jamus said. "So much for reinforcements."

Mattem shook his head, taking hold of himself. "There's one in Estervale. I'll use the platform to get there after we're done, but I wouldn't count on reinforcements. Even before the war, Vigilance never had staffed us properly. We were finally meant to get a fresh recruit from Fel Sadanis this month, but... You do know about that, right? That we lost the city?"

"I was there," Rain said, gesturing to the Custodian's plate hanging from his neck. "Sentinel Bartum gave me this for opening up the dome. I left for Vestvall before—"

A dull clunk interrupted him, followed by a shout from Officer Sana. "Leeka, you're actually him!"

Rain looked to the officer staring at him with almost as much shock as she'd displayed when he'd told her about the Empire, ink spreading across the table from a fallen inkwell. Her mouth worked as she pointed at him. "Your armor's a different color than the report said, and you were supposed to be a bronzeplate, but it's really you! Death Zone, the Night Cleaner!"

Rain groaned.

"Looks like your nicknames have preceded you," Jamus said with a chuckle, clapping Rain on the shoulder. "They're even combining them now."

Carten, meanwhile, was spluttering on his scone, being much less reserved in his amusement.

Rain let out a defeated sigh, turning Tactile Transference back on so he could rub at his eyes.

"Please, just call me Rain."

The sun was creeping toward the horizon by the time Rain's party left the Watch office. Officer Mattem departed for Estervale, carrying Rain's report about the Empire attack on Three Cliffs with him, plus an account of what had happened in Vestvall, including the rank shift, the incident with the Crimson Swords, and what had happened with Lady Sale. To lend weight to the entire tale, and because he'd always intended to, Rain had also given Mattem all of the Watch accolades they'd recovered, having brought them for just that reason.

Officer Sana, meanwhile, insisted on tagging along to the Guild, bringing their party up to four. Rain wouldn't have had the heart to tell her no even if he'd wanted to. Her presence would lend his story credibility, and being a little extra careful about what he said was a small price to pay. Besides, he kind of liked her—and Mattem too, for that matter. They reminded him of Bartum in that they actually seemed to care about the Watch's cause, not just about obeying their superiors.

"It's just down that street there," Sana said when they got close, also acting as a local guide.

"Got it," Rain said, heading that way. The street ended at a gap in a wooden palisade, but without a gate or anything, only a signpost bearing the sword-and-quiver Guild symbol and a helpful listing of buildings, arrows indicating their directions. Rain glanced at it as he walked past, more interested in what Detection was telling him. *Monsters?*

He looked, seeing a stack of cages near what looked like an arena, complete with stands.

Oh.

Returning to his physical senses, Rain scanned the area, finding the main Guild building straight ahead of them near the fence surrounding the delving. It was far from the only building in the complex, though. There was a dormitory and a large tavern off to the left, plus several shops, one being a Havenheid Outfitter like the one that had stood across the street from the Fel Sadanis Guild. Training fields abounded, complete with wooden dummies, archery targets, and the like, many of them currently in use. Besides the arena, several smaller dueling rings were scattered around as well.

"Hey, look!" Carten said, pointing as he noticed the cages. "A Fatbird!"

"Mmm," Rain said. "And two other things I'm not familiar with, plus a bunch of Slimes in those crates. I guess they use them for fights."

"They do," Sana confirmed. "We've been trying to get leader Everiss to stop holding them up here, but she refuses to move the arena down into the delving. I'd say it would take something nasty breaking loose to wake people up, but something *did* a few years ago, and Mattem says there was an even worse incident twenty years back. People like their entertainment more than their safety."

"Fatalities?" Jamus asked.

Sana nodded. "Eight the last time."

"Come on," Rain said sourly, leading the way toward the main building. "Let's just find the branch leader. Everiss, was it?"

They entered the main building through one of three sets of doors, and immediately the difference between this Guild and those in Three Cliffs and Fel Sadanis jumped even more to the fore. The quest hall on its own could have fit the entire Fel Sadanis Guild comfortably inside, both walls lined by windows where blue-coated clerks worked to serve the waiting Guilders and townsfolk. The main floor hosted a trio of three-sided kiosks, completely papered with quest postings as Guilders huddled around to peruse them. Light came not from fires or evertorches but from white-glowing crystals set high in wooden sconces on the walls.

Turning his attention to people, Rain began counting plates with Detection, finding over three hundred bronzeplates in the complex as a whole, not just this room. There were only five silverplates, though—less than he'd expected and less than there'd been in Fel Sadanis. There weren't any goldplates either, but that was in line with what he'd heard. Halgrave was an oddity when it came to branch leaders, most being silver as a rule. Blue-coated clerks rushed about, mixing with the crowd of Guilders and townsfolk, and at the back of the room, Rain saw yet more lines of adventurers waiting for the horse-driven lifts that would take them down into the delving. One of those lifts arrived as he watched, the doors opening to reveal a pair of blood-spattered swordsmen watching over a team of tired-looking workers and a cart of rubble.

"Karum's beard," Carten swore, staring around in awe.

"How deep does the delving go?" Jamus asked, turning to Sana. "All these people..."

"Rank six," she replied. "But the rumor is that a few spots are getting close to rank seven."

"Oh, it's no rumor, officer," said a man in a blue uniform, rushing up to them and greeting Rain with a deep bow. "Silverlord, welcome to the Barstone Guild, home of the most promising delving in the DKE, with no less than three active lairs under our management. How may we serve you today? Would you care to peruse the postings, or would you prefer someone provide you with choice selections suited to your skills?"

"Take me to the branch leader, please," Rain said, ignoring the man's dubious claim and sweeping an eye over him. Other than the Guild logo, he was nondescript but for the unexpected name tag, which said 'Tiller.' The most interesting thing about him, in fact, wasn't something that was there, but something that wasn't.

No plate? Unawakened?

"Meetings with leader Everiss are by appointment only, I'm afraid," said Tiller, his eyes flicking to Rain's Custodian plate, then to officer Sana, his expression one of mild confusion. "If you and your party will come this way, I can check your Guildscore and place you on the schedule."

"It's important," Rain said. "Please just take me to her."

"Pardon, Silverlord, but leader Everiss is a very busy woman, and without checking your Guildscore, I cannot take your word as to the importance of whatever it is you wish to speak with her about. The Barstone guild places great stock in the contribution system, and if—"

"Officer Sana," Rain said, cutting him off and gesturing to Sana, "Please tell him what I told you."

Sana stepped forward, a determined expression on her face. "Three Cliffs has fallen to the Empire. Their ships may be on their way here soon. As an officer of the Watch, I have verified the truth of Custodian Rain's words, not that his position should cast them in doubt."

"Custodian...?" Tiller asked, glancing at her, then back to Rain. "I don't understand. What does that mean, Silverlord? I did not wish to pry, but why do you wear their symbol?"

"Because I earned their trust," Rain replied. "Now, you know the Watch can detect lies, so please just take me to branch leader Everiss. Now."

"But Silverlord, without verifying your contribution, I cannot break procedure without getting myself—and you—into trouble."

"Carten," Rain interrupted, beyond done with this day. "Would you kindly take care of this?"

"You got it, cap'n," Carten said with a grin. "How, though, specifically?" He looked at the clerk, who took a nervous step back in response. "Wouldn't want any...misunderstandin's."

"Just be yourself," Rain said, gesturing broadly at the room. "As loudly as possible, if you would."

Carten laughed, then lifted his shields from the ground and cracked his neck from side to side. Without any further warning, he began slamming them like one of those cymbal monkeys, scaled up to the size of a gorilla, making a truly cacophonous racket. Stillness spread through the room as he slowed, hundreds of heads turning in their direction, and with one final clang, Carten lowered his shields, then bellowed at the top of his lungs. "Oi! The Empire attacked Three Cliffs, an if ye don't listen, we're all gonna die when they come 'ere next!"

"Thank you, Carten," Rain said. He turned toward the mortified clerk as chaos exploded around them. "Now, then, Mr. Tiller. The branch leader, if you please. If it's not too much...*trouble*."