

82: Intent

Far, far away in Xiugaaraa, the City of Lights, Halgrave sat in a brightly-lit private bedroom, deep within the main branch of the Guild. He fought to keep his eyes open. He hadn't slept since the attack on Fel Sadanis and even he was reaching his limit. The City of Lights was hardly a good place for sleep, however. It was situated in a ranked area, which meant that the entire city stayed illuminated at all times, day and night. It took some getting used to, sleeping in a room lit by multicolored magical fire. He focused on the flowing enchantment, trying to track each individual mote of light as a way to distract himself from his exhaustion.

Part of the problem was that the city had gotten carried away with its aesthetic over the years. They had moved away from plain Light runes, considering them too pedestrian, for all that they were rare and expensive anywhere else. Illusions covered the city in blazing glory, each building a unique work of art, inside and out. It was money and power on display, any practical motivation long-since eclipsed by vanity.

To create light-aspect runes, a crafter would need light-aspect spells to base them upon. The more powerful the spell, the more powerful the runes that could be derived from it. That was the first complication: there was no 'Light Magic' tree.

Nevertheless, he had heard tell of a class called 'Light Mage'. Typically, such things required investment in a single tree. Clearly, there was some other method of obtaining it if the rumors were to be believed. It hardly mattered; enchantments such as the one that had his room looking like the inside of a volcano would have needed constant channeling to maintain. Even for the City of Lights, that was a step too far. Further, he knew of no single spell that could have produced this effect.

Workers were needed, Rune Workers specifically. Through knowledge built up by generations of artisans, even seemingly simple runes could create stunning displays when combined. The people who had created the enchantment in his room had hobbled themselves by investing in a crafting class, and only later acquired the light-aspect skills that required.

They were called 'Illuminators', and it was not only a class but a title. The most famous Illuminators were master artists, bending their own light magic into luminous runes, then binding them in stone. It was a position of power and prestige. True Illuminators were past the wall, carried through at great expense and risk by their backers, typically their family. It was a fiercely hereditary business, secret knowledge and patterns passed down from father to son, mother to daughter. Not everyone had such advantages, but that didn't stop people from trying. Few made it. It was difficult for a crafter to advance on their own, even in a city such as this.

Lighters, the failures were called. Once you became one, that was what you would stay, barring incredible luck or talent. Without combat magic and the synergy to boost it, there came a point where even damaging a powerful blue became impossible. To become a Lighter was to choose a life of toil, maintaining the enchantments of the Illuminators and providing mundane lighting for the poorer parts of the city. Still, many chose it, hoping that they could stand out from the pack and earn enough money to hire a full party to get them through the wall.

The competition was fierce, and the success rate low. Unlike any other place in the entire world, practically everyone in Xiugaaraa was awakened. Even a child could manage to kill an essence monster without too much trouble, provided that it was below level five or so. For a city in a ranked zone, that was a very low bar. The lesser wall at level ten was a greater impediment to be sure, but not an insurmountable one. With the help of the old and powerful

families that called the city home, the average level in the city was closer to fifteen, or at least, it had been the last time he was here.

It had become a part of the culture. Children would be taken into the surrounding jungles when they were old enough to have their awakening. They called it the First Dark—the first time that a teenager would encounter any darkness other than that behind their eyelids.

Getting past the true wall at twenty-five, however, was another matter entirely. It took a full group of eight people at that level or better to even survive in a place where such a powerful blue would spawn. Bringing even one person along who was below that limit meant significant danger to the whole group. If that person had a crafting class, as all Lighters did, then it became almost impossible without higher-level assistance. The monster would need to be weakened and restrained until the crafter could land a blow or two with powerfully enchanted equipment. Further, it had to be the right kind of blue, one whose defenses could be overcome by the underpowered individual in question. Sitting in this room, Halgrave was wishing that it was even harder.

He scowled at the illusory lava flowing down the walls, giving up on puzzling out the pattern. Many rooms in the Guild were done with a fire theme, the Illuminators paying honor to the powerful and famous Guildmaster. For a bedroom, it was utterly ridiculous. A plain, steady light was all that was needed to keep anything from spawning. He sighed and rubbed at his eyes, debating whether it was worth the risk to rest with them closed, just for a few minutes. Luckily, he was interrupted by a knock on the door just as he started to drift off.

His eyes flicked back open and he sat up straight once more. "Come," he said in common.

The door opened to reveal a bronzeplate, wearing the uniform that signified he'd chosen a life of service as a Guild clerk over one of adventure. The man bowed low and stayed there as he

spoke. "Honored branch leader Halgrave," the man said in Zeelada. "The most glorious supreme ruler of fire, Burrik the Volcano, awaits your illustrious presence to discuss the matter of the DKE assault on Fel Sadanis. If it would please you to follow this humble servant..."

Halgrave sighed again. *I hate Zeelada. The language itself is fine, but everyone who speaks it is just full of wind. Always with the bowing and the scraping and the florid courtesy. It's exhausting. I remember why I left. I hope Burrik's still got his head on straight.* He cleared his throat, then responded in a thickly accented attempt at the same language. "All you needed to say was 'he's ready for you'. Stop bowing. Let's go."

Training Overview

General Experience Earned

Mana Use: 22000

Skill Experience Earned

Mana Manipulation: 883

Aura Compression: 4444

Attributes

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

Level 18

Experience: 22749/22750

Dynamo

Health	400
Stamina	200
Mana	8565

Strength	20[10]
Recovery	18[10]
Endurance	10
Vigor	42[10]
Focus	49[10]
Clarity	250[200]

Free Points	0
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Statistics

	Total	Base	Modifier
Health	400	400	0 100%
H.Regen	180/day	180/day	0/day 100%
Stamina	200	200	0 100%
S.Regen	420/day	420/day	0/day 100%
Mana	8565	8565	0 100%
M.Regen	1.4/s	0.269/s	-0.05/s 539.6%

Movement Speed	10
Perception	20

Resistances

Heat	Cold	Light	Dark
1 0%	1 0%	1 0%	1 0%
Force	Arcane	Mental	Chemical
1 0%	1 0%	1 0%	1 0%

Adaptation

	Effective	Total	Base	Potential	Buff	Tolerance
Strength	4.6	20	10	23%	10	15
Recovery	6.56	18	10	41%	8	6
Endurance	3	10	10	30%	0	2
Vigor	9.12	42	10	38%	32	14
Focus	41	49	10	100%	39	31
Clarity	242	250	200	100%	50	42

	Current	Tolerance
Enchantment Stat Boosts	139	130
Enchantment Resistances	0	Unknown

Rain smiled as he reviewed his training overview. He'd shot straight back to the experience cap thanks to all the mana he'd spent on Operation Heatsink, but that wasn't what he was so satisfied to see. It would have had other mages spitting blood, he was sure, but for him, it was just another day. No, what he was smiling about was the progress he'd made on his tolerances. He'd gone up by a few paltry points in his physical skills, but the improvement to Focus and Clarity was astounding.

When he'd checked the night before, he'd already made great progress, gaining two points in Focus and a whopping twelve in Clarity. The difference came from the fact that his Focus buff had been much lower—positive proof that it mattered how hard you pushed yourself past your limits. He'd adjusted the ring, taking points from the physical stats to maximize his mental buffs overnight. That had paid off splendidly, gaining him another twelve points each in Focus and Clarity. The lowered drain from the barrier combined with the boost to his regen had also allowed him to make some good progress on his armor at last, restoring over a thousand points of durability.

His overall tolerance to enchantment stat boosts had gone up, gaining one point as of last night, and then one more by the morning. He'd decided to set the ring to ten over the max

before he went to bed, testing the hypothesis that he was hurting himself by pushing too hard. From the fact that he'd gained only 1 point both times, it didn't look like it was that big of an effect. More testing would be required. More testing was *always* required.

His Health and Stamina were currently full and his Mana was slowly recovering now that he'd stopped charging the armor. He'd set his alarm for eight, woken with everyone else, and was now lazing about in bed reviewing his stats. He was in no rush. After yesterday, he couldn't bring himself to care about what the Watch thought of him sitting there, staring into the distance. That said, he wasn't planning on spending a bunch of time puzzling at the underlying math. He still had a bunch of open questions, such as 'Why haven't my potentials moved?' and 'What's the limit for the tolerance to a single stat?', but he'd wasted a bunch of time yesterday worrying about that stuff and not come any closer to puzzling out any answers. He wasn't going to figure it out just sitting there. As long as he was making progress somehow, he was happy. He did at least want to set the ring up properly so his tolerances would improve in the background, though. He accessed the panel for the ring, adjusting the settings to focus on the mental stats.

Adaptation

	Effective	Total	Base	Potential	Buff	Tolerance
Strength	4.6	20	10	23%	10	15
Recovery	4.1	10	10	41%	0	6
Endurance	3	10	10	30%	0	2
Vigor	9.12	27	10	38%	17	14
Focus	41	61	10	100%	51	31
Clarity	242	262	200	100%	62	42

	Current	Tolerance
Enchantment Stat Boosts	140	130
Enchantment Resistances	0	Unknown

I'm getting really tired of having to worry about charging my armor all the time. Once I get the mental stats done, then I can worry about the physical. I should make progress just from using mana, which is easy by comparison. I don't feel like heading straight out to work on Operation Heatsink, though. I'll go find Melka and see how she's doing, then go from there. The way Phoss phrased it yesterday, it sounded like I might get a different handler each day. I don't want a different handler.

He got up and wandered over to the mess hall. Melka was already there, sitting at a table by herself and looking tired. He grabbed three loaves of bread and a crock of butter, then made his way over to her table. She looked up at his approach and raised an eyebrow.

"Mind if I join you?" he said, motioning to the table.

Melka shrugged. "Sure."

Rain smiled and sat, removing his helmet so he could start attacking the bread. He hadn't been jogging the day before, but all the walking added up and there hadn't been much food

available when he returned to the stronghold the night before. He ripped off a huge piece of bread, slathered it in butter, and crammed it into his mouth, chewing happily.

"Wow," Melka said, shaking her head as she cut into a sausage with one of her daggers. "What did that bread do? Kill your family?"

Rain laughed, buttering another piece as he swallowed the first. "It's good bread, what can I say? Plus, those sausages are disgusting."

"Yeah, they're kind of an acquired taste," Melka said with another shrug. "I like them, though."

"Is it always the same thing, every day?" Rain asked, gesturing to the serving area.

"Not always. They change it up from time to time. Depends on what the clerks can get a good deal on. It's free, so I try not to complain. I can always get breakfast somewhere else if I need to, or just skip it."

Rain nodded. "Yeah, I never really ate breakfast that much before I came to Fel Sadanis. I've been doing so much work since I got here, though, that I really need it. Say, does Strength make you need more food?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full, you're getting crumbs everywhere."

"Oh, sorry," Rain said. "It's just so flakey."

Melka sighed and shook her head. "Are we not going to talk about what happened last night?"

"I'd rather not," Rain said, pausing to look at her. "Not unless...you want to. I wasn't going to bring it up. Bread, butter, and light conversation. None of that heavy crap. Just...you didn't get in trouble, did you?"

Melka shook her head. "Phoss didn't say anything. I'm supposed to go with you again today. Either he doesn't know, or he doesn't care."

"Ah, good... That's good," Rain said awkwardly, then ripped off another piece of bread. He looked around, then slapped his forehead. "Oh, I forgot to grab my breakfast beer. Way better than the stuff last night, that's for damn sure."

"Here," Melka said, sliding a small cup across to him. "I haven't touched mine. I don't plan to, either. Not after last night. I just grabbed it by habit."

"Right," Rain said, looking down at the cup with a frown. "Thanks..."

Melka looked at him with a complicated smile. "We weren't talking about it, right?"

"Right," Rain said with a nod. "So, changing the topic back, Strength makes you hungry?"

"Yes. Vigor does as well. Endurance and Recovery do the opposite. You can always tell who's got a bad balance by how they eat. Right now, you're eating like you've never put a single point in Endurance or Recovery in your life."

Rain laughed, trying to hide his spike of alarm at the accuracy of her guess. *She doesn't know how right she is. Have they guessed I'm a Dynamo yet? Does it even matter if they know? I'll just ignore that thought for right now. It's probably fine, but it might be a good idea to keep being paranoid. Oh crap, she's looking at me funny. I've taken too long. Crap, what were we talking*

about? Oh, stats. Quick, ask something else...uh. He cleared his throat. "Right. Next question, how does potential work?"

Melka tilted her head. "Potential?"

Whew. Now she just looks confused. I can work with confused. He shrugged. "You might call it something else. I kind of thought up the term on my own. Um, how do I explain this?" He gestured with a piece of bread. "It's like, how much of your power you can use."

Melka shook her head. "Too vague. I have no idea what you're talking about."

Rain frowned. "Okay, so for an example, pretend I'm really indecisive and have 30 free stat points saved up. I dump them all in, say, Strength. What happens?"

"You get stronger," Melka said, "obviously."

"Right, but why? And how quickly? And why don't you get instant abs?"

Melka laughed. "Instant abs?"

Rain smiled. *Infomercial.* You wouldn't believe the crap that they try to sell you where I'm from." He paused. *Shit.* "Don't ask where I'm from."

"Okay..." Melka said. "I'm still not seeing what your question is."

Rain set down his bread to rub at his temples. *I'm really bad at this. I should just stop hiding, but it's hard. Crap, she's giving me the look again.* He lowered his hands and shrugged. "Sorry, just thinking of how to explain. You get muscles by working out. Exercising, training, picking

things up and putting them down. You know, the normal way that works for everyone, awakened or not. Stats are different. They make you stronger, but you still need to train to use them fully according to a friend of mine. Hence, potential."

Melka smiled and shook her head. "Oh, you're talking about synchronization. You're pretty bad at explaining things."

Rain smiled, back in familiar territory. "So I've been told. Synchronization you said? What's that?"

"It's how in sync your body is with your soul."

"Oh," Rain said. *Humm. So the soul is where the stats live, and the body needs to train to use them. I think I like that view of it a lot better. Okay, synchronization it is.*

"You do believe in the soul, right?" Melka said, looking at him.

"Yeah, I suppose I do," Rain said with a shrug. "Don't ask me to define what it is, but it works well enough as a concept to explain this stuff, so whatever."

"I agree with that," Melka said. "The Watch teaches us to be pragmatic. Leave the philosophy to the theologians. Not many of those around here, thank the gods."

Rain smiled. "Funny. Not religious, then?"

"Nope," she said. "I've got no issue with believers, but it's not for me. The gods exist, sure, but I'm not expecting them to solve my problems for me any time soon. You won't find many in the Watch that do, especially in Fel Sadanis."

"Yeah, I was wondering about that," Rain said, "but I wonder about a lot of things. We're getting off topic. Synchronization? How's it work, and how can I improve it?"

"I'm no expert," said Melka. "Just train. You're a mage, so use magic. You'll get better in time."

Rain sighed. "That's not the issue. My magic is fine, it's my body that is pathetic. I've been trying, but my synchronization hasn't gotten any better."

"You can actually see your synchronization? Through your interface?"

Rain froze. *Oops. Ah, fuck it.* He nodded. "Yeah."

"Humm," Melka said. "How long have you been training without it getting better?"

"Since I've been checking it? Two days."

Melka laughed, setting down her fork. "I've been training for years, and I'm still nowhere close to the limit. I can't see it, but I can feel it, and I've got a long way to go. What, did you think you could change your body overnight?"

"Hey," Rain said. "This stuff is weird, okay? I know it won't be easy, but I expected...I don't know, something."

"Well, don't look at me, I'm not a scholar. Just train more. Lift heavier rocks."

Rain snorted. "Thanks, Mel."

"Any time," she said with a small smile. "Now come on, bread man, let's go before Phoss or Lamida shows up."

"Oddments! Staples! Whether you need something rare or something common, come, come, I have what you are looking for! Low prices! Wide selection!"

"Dad, there's nobody coming. Stop being loud."

"Hush, Ava," Mlem said in a much quieter voice, "Haven't you been paying attention? I told you we're going to use this technique today. We're looking for people who don't know what they're looking for. Go on, you give it a go. Try to be adorable. It shouldn't be hard for you."

"Dad!" Ava protested. "I don't want to. It's troublesome."

"Stop saying troublesome. Use a different word once in a while, not the newest one you learned over and over again."

"Using different words is troublesome."

Mlem sighed and looked at his daughter as she puffed out her cheeks. His heart melted, but he forced himself to adopt a stern tone. "Don't be difficult, Ava. Our stock right now isn't what people are going to look for on their own. This stuff isn't going to sell itself and we need to get rid of it all so we can afford to buy more food. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is. I know you remember Rule 2."

"You've got to put in the work," Ava said.

He nodded. "Good girl." He gestured to the crowd of people milling about the stalls. "Well?" He looked back at her and raised an eyebrow. "Let's have it."

"Fine," Ava said with a huff, then hopped up onto his chair. She took a deep breath and hollered. "Junk! We've got junk! Come buy our junk!"

"Ava!" Mlem said, shocked. He looked out at the faces of the crowd looking back at them, then laughed and jostled his daughter, making her whirl her arms to maintain balance on the chair. "You're not wrong. Come on, though. You can do better. List out what we have. Go on."

Ava rolled her eyes. "Pots! Blankets! Knives and swords! Thread! Healing scrolls!"

"Good, good," said Mlem. "Much better. Don't stop. Once you get to the end of the list, start over. Keep going even if someone comes. You bring in the fish, and I'll land them."

Ava nodded. "Boots! Socks! Rope! Horseshoes, but not horses! Books! Um... Oh! Tel for copper! Copper for Tel! Mana charging!"

"Books?" a familiar voice said. "Did you say books?" Mlem swiveled his head, then grinned widely as he saw a huge black-cloaked form making its way through the crowd toward their stall.

"Ah, it's you," he said, twirling his mustache, "I was wondering when you would show up. Yes, I have a few books."

"Rag Man!" Ava said, laughing and jumping off the chair to run up to Rain.

"Rag Man?" said a new voice. There was a Watch officer following the armored adventurer, looking at Ava curiously. She looked at Rain. "Rain, I thought you were the Night Cleaner." Mlem smiled. They clearly knew each other from the dejected slump of the man's shoulders. *I have to find out where he got that armor. Simply marvelous articulation.*

"Ah!" Ava said, then ran to hide behind Mlem's robes.

Mlem chuckled. "Pay her no mind, my lady. She isn't used to the Watch." He looked between Rain and the officer. "Come on, Ava, don't be afraid. I'm sure she doesn't bite." *I hope.* He looked at the officer speculatively. She was young, with straight brown hair and an attractive face bearing an actual human expression. That was a good sign. Most Watch members looked down their noses at you with suspicion in their eyes, walking stiffly because of the sticks they carried up their—

"Mlem, this is Melka," Rain said, interrupting his thoughts. "She's an officer of the Watch," Rain said, motioning to her. "Mel, this is Mlemlek Ko-Latti, wandering merchant extraordinaire."

Ah, magnificent. He remembered, and even pronounced it right. "Charmed," he said, bowing deeply to the Watch officer. He didn't miss the opportunity to twirl his mustache again as he rose. Salina had always loved it when he did that.

"Your daughter?" the officer asked. Mlem nodded and she continued. "She said mana charging. How much?"

Mlem smiled, his face a mask for the annoyance he felt. "Reasonable rates, reasonable rates," he said to buy time. *Well, she knows I'm awakened, now. I told Ava not to mention mana charging in Fel Sadanis, but...oh well. The salt's already in the stew; there's no taking it out.* "May I see the item in question? Oh, your pardon, Rain. Ava, could you see if you can find some books for our adventurer friend?"

"That's all right," Rain said. "I'm curious about mana charging too. I'll wait until you're done with Mel."

"Ah, very good," Mlem said, turning back to Melka.

She offered him a dagger that she had drawn from a sheath at her hip. "I haven't seen an islander in Fel Sadanis in many years," she said. "What brings you this far north?"

"Commerce, of course!" Mlem said, taking the dagger. He held it up to inspect. It was fairly well made and bore a basic sharpness enchantment. It was nearly depleted, however. It would take him around a thousand mana to restore it to full.

"Well?" Melka said.

"This is a marvelous piece," Mlem said, holding up the dagger to glint against the light. "The charge is low, however. It will cost...say...thirty Tel to refill."

Melka's eyes narrowed. "You are overcharging me."

"I would never dare," said Mlem, feigning offense. "Ava, rule 73 please."

"Don't lie to the Watch," Ava said. "There's no point."

"Right you are," Mlem said. *You could have left off the second half of that, Ava.* "Apologies, my lady, but mana is dear. If not for Rain and that marvelous spell of his, I would not do it for any price."

"What's the normal rate?" Rain asked. "If not for the dome, what would you charge?"

"It varies," Mlem said. "Out here, mages are rare enough to keep demand high. Ten Tel per thousand mana spent would be reasonable."

"Wow, that much?" Rain said. Mlem nodded.

"Fuck," Rain said. He had a curious expression on his face. "Hey, can I see that for a second?"

Mlem looked at Melka for confirmation. She nodded, so he handed the dagger to Rain. *Damn it, he's going to undercut me, isn't he? It figures that a mana fountain like him would have Mana Manipulation.* Of course, he let none of this show on his face.

"There you go," Rain said, handing the dagger back to Melka. "All charged."

"Wait, really?" Melka said, staring at the dagger. Mlem blinked.

Rain laughed. "Really. Want me to do the other one?"

"Well, yeah," she said, handing it to him. He passed it back to her after a moment. This time, Mlem was paying close attention and didn't miss the subtle flicker of light from within Rain's helmet. *He really is charging them. And fast, too.*

"Sorry, Mlem," Rain said with a shrug. "I'm not trying to put you out of business, but sixty Tel is just way too much."

"Dad, the Rag Man just kicked your ass," Ava said, nodding sagely, then ruined it by breaking out into laughter.

Mlem's shoulders slumped, but he quickly recovered as he realized what his daughter had said. "Ava, language!" he scolded her, sharply. *I should really watch what I say around her.* He shook his head and looked back at Rain. *Humm. He must be even closer to the pure mage side of things than I thought, casually spending thousands of mana like that. He doesn't even look fazed.* He decided to ignore the still giggling Ava, addressing Rain instead. "I would get mad at you for that, but I can't, because you're the only reason I have any mana at all. All the same, I think I'm inclined to overcharge you for the books now."

Rain laughed. "I suppose I deserve that. What books do you have? I've been meaning to get something to read, and I've yet to find a library. Well, I did find one, kinda, but...it's not mine and...sorry, you don't care about that. What do you have available?"

Mlem smiled. *What an odd adventurer he is.* "Let me see here," he said, turning around to dig through his cart. He found the bag containing the healing scrolls and carefully pulled out the one beneath it, containing books as well as some blank folios and writing supplies. The books were actually among the most valuable things he had for sale, but he tried to moderate his excitement at someone being interested in them. It was not good to appear too eager.

"I have four," he said, setting them out for the adventurer to see. He recited the titles from memory, not bothering to read them. "*Legends of the Green Wood*, a collection of children's stories; Maxwell's untitled treatise on the tax code and economic policy of old Osar, gods know I've had that one for a while; *Zeelada for the Layman*, not bad as such things go, but hardly enough to become fluent; and *The Glorious Rise of Adamant*, propaganda, mostly, but there's some truth in there. Anything you're interested in?"

"They all cost the same?" Rain said. "How much are we talking?"

A curious phrase. Mlem rubbed his mustache as he considered. "Five Tel for the children's stories, twenty for the book on Zeelada, and fifteen for the one on the Empire. By rights, I should charge fifty for the one on tax code, just by word count alone. I pity the scribe who had to make copies of *that*. Still, I'm getting tired of carrying it around, so I'd let it go for, say, twenty-five." *I'm never going to get rid of that damn thing.*

"That's...really expensive," Rain said. "Mel, how much should books cost?"

"It's not that bad, actually," Melka said. "Converting to copper...yeah. He's quoting you an honest price, as far as I can tell."

"Of course," Mlem said, nodding to her. "To be clear, I was joking when I said I would overcharge you. I would do no such thing."

"Whatever you say," Rain said, turning one of the books over in his hands. "Ava's face says different."

He sighed as the Watch officer laughed. *Damn it, Ava.*

"I'll give you 40 Tel for all four," Rain said, bringing Mlem's attention back to him.

"Sixty," he said automatically.

"Really, Rain?" Melka asked. "You're going to spend that much on books?"

"Melka, I haven't read anything more interesting than a menu for months," Rain said. "I'm going through entertainment withdrawal, here. Still, sixty is too much. Forty, or I walk."

"Now, now," Mlem said. "I could do, perhaps, fifty-five?"

"Forty," Rain said. His voice was suddenly cold.

Mlem couldn't even get a peek through the slit of his visor to gauge his expression. It was simply too dark inside. *Where did this haggling monster come from? I can't figure this guy out at all.* "Fifty, and that is the absolute lowest I will go," he said.

"Nope," said Rain, shaking his armored head. "Come on, Melka, I need to stop by the Guild. We've spent enough time here." He started walking away.

Damn it. Mlem looked at the books, then at the back of the receding adventurer. Forty Tel, versus some books that he likely wouldn't be able to sell to anyone else. Everyone already knew the children's stories, and the others were specialty interests at best. He wasn't likely to find a scholar in Fel Sadanis who'd be interested in them. With forty Tel, he could buy a veritable mountain of food. *Rule 17, a loss is justified if it can be turned to gain.*

Mlem sighed. *Damn it, he got me. I might be able to get forty-five, but at this point, that's just quibbling.* "Fine!" he shouted. Rain stopped and looked over his shoulder. Mlem ran a hand over his bald head. "Forty Tel."

"Deal," Rain said.

Melka was lost in thought as she followed Rain through the crowded streets. The armored man was attracting quite a bit of attention as he plowed through the mass of people, but very few seemed willing to try and stop him, or speak to him at all for that matter. The dark,

outlandish armor and the hooded black cloak gave him a menacing appearance. Despite all of the positive actions he'd taken for the city, she still heard whispers of unease driven by his appearance alone.

Who the hells is he? Where did he come from? Idly, she touched one of the daggers hanging at her belt. He just charged them, like that. He didn't even ask me to pay him back. Why did he do that? Does he really have so much mana that he can just casually throw it around? Does he not care about money? But then, why did he bother to haggle with the merchant? And how could he not know what books cost, or mana for that matter? It doesn't make any sense. I want to just ask, but I can't just start prying. The Sentinels told me to find out as much as I can, but...

She shook her head, feeling uncomfortable. *He pulled me out of that bar, sobered me up, gods know how, then just...took me back? I can't believe I told him all that stuff. He's been nothing but kind to me, and here I am spying on him. Is he... interested in me? I can't tell. He's just been...nice. Damn it, what am I supposed to do here? She sighed. That's it, I'm going to tell them to assign someone else. I can't do this...*

Wait... She felt a chill as she stared at the hulking black-cloaked form in front of her. *Maybe this was his plan all along. He charged the daggers so I'd feel like I owed him. He's trying to, I don't know, win me over or something. Make me betray the Watch so he can...what?* She watched as Rain gently lifted a small child who had run out of the crowd and was clinging on to his leg. He passed the little girl to a man, clearly the girl's father from the fearful expression on his face. Melka shook her head. The man had nothing to worry about. *No, that doesn't make any sense at all. He's working with us, even though Phoss and Lamida are treating him like shit. He's barely even complained. I don't get it. He could have asked for money or weapons or something, but no, he just agreed without batting an eye. Where's all the greed and self-interest? Is he really helping the city just because he wants to?*

She shook her head again. *He's got to be the worst adventurer I've ever heard of.*

Contrary to her training, she'd come to learn that not all adventurers were violent psychopaths. They were careless and self-interested, true, but not malicious as a rule. Some were worse, like Lavarro, and others were better. Rain, however, appeared to be on a completely different level. If he was sincere, then he was just more proof that everything she'd been taught was wrong, or at least a shameless exaggeration.

Watch standard policy was to treat all awakened not in the Watch as potential threats. Records of abuses of power and casual disregard for the unawakened had been hammered into her since she could remember, held up as proof of the danger. When she was younger, she'd just accepted it, seeing the Watch as the only force fighting back against the chaos. For the past few years, though, she'd been questioning this policy. She'd never seen anything even approaching the horrors that the older sentinels talked about. She wasn't alone in her beliefs, either. A few others from her cadre agreed with her, including sentinel Talasa.

Melka sighed. When Talasa had been selected for advancement, she had hoped that there would be some changes. That had just been wishful thinking. Even though Talasa was technically a sentinel now, she had no real influence. She'd been fast-tracked for advancement because her class was needed, not because she had the respect of the sentinels in charge.

I should just quit and join the Guild, just as a 'fuck you'. She shook her head sadly. *As if. I wish that was an option, but it's not. Damn it.*

"Hey, no brooding," Rain said, startling her. He was still walking in front of her, not looking back.

"How do you know I'm brooding if you aren't looking at me?" she asked.

"I can tell. It's like there's a dark cloud following me. You haven't said anything since the market."

Melka shook her head. "Maybe I don't have anything to say."

Rain stopped suddenly and she almost crashed into him. He was staring at a building to their left, completely frozen.

"What is it?" she said, looking at the building. "A butcher shop?"

"Damn it, it's gone again," Rain muttered, shaking his head. He looked at her. "Oh, um...no, not the butcher shop. Something else."

Melka just raised an eyebrow. "What?"

He sighed, then turned to her and raised his visor. He seemed to struggle with something, then shook his head and looked around before speaking in a low voice. "I have a skill called Detection. It lets me sense monsters within a certain radius when I use it. That's what all the little hiccups in Winter are, by the way. I just felt one in the city. The last time I sensed it was before the dome went up. I'm not sure it's the same one, but it's definitely not a slime. Come on, it's this way."

"Wait," Melka said, trying to process what he had just said. *He can sense monsters? What? And he just told me that like it was nothing?* "You're sure?"

He nodded, then lowered his visor again. "Yeah, come on. It's going to get out of range. Wait... damn it. It just vanished. Did someone kill it? No, wait, there it is again. Can it hide somehow?" He broke out into a jog, then glanced back at her and stopped. "You coming or not?"

She shook her head, then nodded, hurrying to catch up and falling in beside him as he started jogging again. His armor was amazingly silent as he ran, other than the clatter of his metal boots on the cobblestones. She glanced over at him occasionally as they ran, thinking.

The fact that there was a monster in the city wasn't that alarming. It was probably just sentinel Galo. She didn't know the man personally, but she'd seen him train. Tamers could summon and dismiss their dominated monsters at will, which made sense given what Rain had said. He was also heading in the direction of the northern stronghold, so that checked out too. She shook her head. "Stop," she said, coming to a halt. Rain ran on for a few more paces, then slowed to look back at her. She couldn't see his expression, but it was clear that he wanted her to explain why she'd stopped.

"It's a Watch sentinel called Galo," she said. "He's a tamer. That street leads to the northern stronghold. If you just run in there, he'll know about your skill. Trust me, you don't want that. He's an asshole, like Phoss. No, worse than Phoss."

Rain stopped completely, then walked back to her, raising his visor. "You're sure it's him?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "How do you know?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure, but it's pretty likely. He's usually stationed there."

"Okay, let's go anyway," Rain said. "And don't worry about it. The sentinels already know I have it, or at least, they should have guessed by now. Plus, I just told you about it, and you're

supposed to tell them everything you learn about me anyway. It's okay, you don't have to pretend like you're not spying on me."

She opened her mouth, but he raised a hand to stop her before she even figured out what she was going to say.

"It's not like it would be hard for someone to guess. It's only tier 1; anyone could just spend a hundred experience and read what it does. If you'd asked me about it a week ago, I'd probably have imploded or something, but paranoia about people knowing what I can do isn't going to help me much at this point. I'm not going to go into details on how it works specifically, but it is telling me that there's a monster where there shouldn't be. I can't *not* go check it out. Plus, if Galo is a Tamer like you say, that's awesome and I want to see. Shame he's an asshole. I'll take your word for it. I have to say, you are probably the coolest member of the Watch that I've met. No offense, but most of you are a bit...yeah."

Melka blinked. "Coolest?"

"Don't worry, it's a good thing," Rain said.

She raised an eyebrow, rolling her hand for him to continue.

He sighed deeply. "I am so tired of having to explain what 'cool' means."

Lavarro sighed and pushed herself away from the wall, scowling in disgust.

As she moved away the illusion of flowing water wavered, then recovered its integrity. The Illuminator who'd set the enchantments in this room hadn't been very good. A properly laid enchantment would have parted and flowed around her when she disrupted it, but this one had just fizzled out, fading to motes of unbound light mana. That was to be expected. This was a servant's room, situated three floors below the Guildmaster's office—hardly worth the expense of a more elaborate working.

She closed her eyes and sighed, standing motionless in the center of the room to collect her thoughts. She'd been listening through the walls, sending strands of delicate force magic through the stone to amplify and return any minuscule vibrations to her. Now that she'd dropped the spell, the silence was deafening.

Burrik's office was warded, naturally. For a lesser mage, that would have been the end of it, but not for her. She was well beyond such things. The entire building spoke to her, and teasing the voices of the two men she was interested in out from the throng of other sounds was simply a matter of focus. To her, it was as natural as breathing, taking barely any effort at all. It wasn't strain that had caused the expression currently twisting her face, it was what the two had been saying.

They would do nothing.

Halgrave had at first demanded retaliation, but Burrik had shut him down, hard. When pressed, Halgrave had backed off, like he always did. He would rant and he would rave, but he would obey the Guildmaster's command. Burrik had convinced him that the risk of tipping the war in the Empire's favor was simply too great. They were cowards, both of them, afraid of what would happen if they used the power that they had worked so hard to earn. For all his

talk of freedom, Halgrave was just another slave. An obedient dog, all bark and no bite, not when it really mattered. It was part of why she'd left him.

She touched the silver plate hanging from her neck lightly, the constant reminder of her failure to break through. She shook her head and grasped it in her fist, pulling sharply to break the metal chain that held it around her neck. The plate and the chain fell to the floor with a soft chime of metal. She walked from the room, fists clenched and eyes hard as stone.

She had abandoned Halgrave.

She would have to abandon the Guild.

She would not abandon her daughter.