

## 096: Sanctuary

Stars twinkled in a sky with no moon, far above Fel Sadanis. The barrier arched overhead, a buildup of smoke swirling inside and ruining the perfect view from the ground. There were no longer many fires burning in the city, but the damage had been done. The air was heavy with the odor of charred wood with just a hint of excrement to accompany it.

No people were around to be seen, save for the cloaked form of a lone man towing a smallish two-wheeled cart behind himself. The city was not safe after dark, not like it once was. The Watch no longer patrolled the streets, and people were starting to get desperate. After the riots, many had been left with nothing, not even homes to return to. The strong preyed upon the weak, and while the city was slowly returning itself to order, it was best not to go anywhere alone. The cloaked man, however, had decided to do just that.

The figure reached the bridge that spanned the Sadanis river and paused. His head pivoted to stare at an alley, his face shrouded in shadow by the cowl of his cloak.

Like bees from a kicked hive, a pack of ragged forms swarmed from the alley, encircling the man in a loose ring. Muggers. One of them broke from the circle and stepped forward to speak to their unfortunate target.

"Never should have come here!" said the leader of the group in a rough, angry voice. He bore a wicked grin on a face full of broken teeth, girded by a tangled black beard. "Give us all you got in that cart, or we'll cut you."

The mugger's grin faltered as he drew nearer to the man trapped in the center of the ring. The echo of laughter could be heard as the figure reached up, then lowered its hood.

"Gah!" the leader exclaimed, backpedaling.

Rain swept his gaze unconcernedly at the ring of ruffians surrounding him. Perhaps his tiredness was getting to him, but no matter how dire the situation was in the city, he just couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity. Clearly, this mugger had played the Elder Scrolls.

"Stay where you are," Rain said sharply, cutting off his laughter upon seeing that the muggers were about to turn tail and run. He punctuated his words with a blast of Refrigerate, giving it a bit of extra oomph to counteract the heat in the air. "If you run, you die."

Rain had long-since set IFF to exclude all humans, but the wave of cold air and sudden frost still halted them in their tracks. There would be no way these lowlifes wouldn't know who he was or what he could do. He had Kettel's loose mouth to thank for that. The events that had occurred in the Fells were the common gossip in the city now.

Rain took no satisfaction from the look of abject terror that had settled onto the leader's face. The whites of the man's eyes were visible as he frantically looked to his followers for support. Behind Rain's back, the blanket covering the contents of the cart shifted as Dozer moved in its sleep. Rain paid the restless slime no mind, ignoring his headache to focus on the would-be mugger in front of him. "Tell them to drop their weapons."

The man didn't respond, cowering back in fear. Nevertheless, there was a clatter of steel on stone as the bandits disarmed themselves. Upon closer inspection, most of them didn't even have proper weapons, merely long kitchen knives, fire pokers, and the like.

Rain sighed, looking at the terrified excuse for a thug standing in front of him. He'd taken the man for a hardened criminal based on the beard, but it looked like he wasn't much older than

Kettel. Clearly, whatever was wrong with Rain's soul was affecting the man, as this level of terror was unreasonable outside of a storybook. Rain tried to calm himself down, having noticed that the effect seemed tied to his mood somehow.

He looked away from the leader to scan the faces of the others. He saw wariness and fear in their expressions, but nothing approaching level of terror that the man in front of him was displaying. Rain's eyes snagged on one face in particular, and he felt a thrill of recognition. Before he could even process that, however, a whimper brought his attention back to the man in front of him.

*Damn it, Rain, why did you threaten to kill them? It's not like I'd actually be willing to back that up. Lucky for me, it doesn't seem like they want to test me on it. Still, I'm too tired to think straight. I need to be more careful about what I say.*

He cleared his throat, then spoke loudly, addressing the whole group. "Listen well, because I'm only going to say this once. There will be no more muggings. You will NOT rob people. We are all trapped in here together, and this kind of behavior is counterproductive."

He looked at the unwashed faces of the people surrounding him and fought off the urge to sigh. At first, they had looked desperate, but now, having come to grips with the fact that they were facing an adventurer, that desperation had faded to be replaced by hopelessness.

Rain spoke again, in a softer tone this time. "I know the nobles have blocked off most of the warehouses and are charging for access to clean water. I will deal with them, so just stay calm until then. Ask your neighbors to help and give help in return if you are able. Attacking people in the street is not the way." He shook his head, then raised himself up and hardened his tone again. "Now, cease this foolishness and go back to your families. And spread the word. There

WILL be order in the city. Anyone causing chaos will get a visit from me.” He released another pulse of Refrigerate, just to make his point abundantly clear.

The former leader of the muggers needed no further encouragement. He turned and ran, sprinting for the alley. The others started to follow but froze when Rain suddenly pointed at the man he had recognized in the crowd.

“Not you. Everyone else, go.”

Showing the expected level of support for their unfortunate companion, the rest of the would-be muggers vanished into the darkness, leaving Rain staring at the man he’d singled out.

Rain didn’t move, not wanting to approach lest his damaged soul turn the man into a quivering mess. He crossed his arms, speaking in the same frigid tone that had proven so effective on the others. “You owe me twenty-one Tel, sixty-four copper, and two bits.”

“Please, Death Zone, I...” said the man, then he blinked, Rain’s words having made it through to his brain. “Wait, what? No I don’t. That’s not fair! You can’t just say I owe you when I’ve never met you before! This is robbery! Didn’t you just say no robbery? Besides, I don’t even have it!”

Rain sighed and shook his head. He’d known the man didn’t have much money on him, thanks to Detection, but that wasn’t the point. “You do owe me. Over a month ago, you helped someone carry a wounded man to the Guild. Then, you picked his pocket. Don’t even try to deny it.”

"No I didn't! I would never—" The man gasped and staggered back as Rain blasted the air with Refrigerate. There was no need to be gentle. Thanks to overmana, he never forgot a face. This *was* the man who had robbed him.

Rain was tired, his head was pounding, and the attempted mugging had his temper teetering on a knife's edge. The rampant looting and rioting were bad enough, but the nobles' hoarding of food and water was just despicable. His opinion of humanity had reached an all-time low. He took a step forward, moving closer to the backpedaling thief.

"Fine!" The man said, raising his hands to ward him away. "I stole the idiot's money. Why the depths do you care? It was just some greenhorn. Besides, I already spent it ages ago. I'm not lying."

Rain narrowed his eyes. "It shouldn't matter why I care. The person you robbed, let's just say I know him well. Because you took his money, he couldn't afford for his friend to be healed. Did you think of that, when you lifted his purse?"

The man opened his mouth to say something, but Rain was in no mood to hear it. "Shut up," he snapped, then stared at the man, trying to decide what to do. The silence stretched on and on as Rain's temper slowly cooled.

Finally, he sighed. *It's not worth it. I don't have the energy for this, and my head is killing me.* He made a show of looking around the street, then gestured. "It occurs to me that your friends left some of their belongings scattered about. Collect them all up and bring them to my cart, plus whatever money you have on you, and I'll call it even. Be thankful that you aren't worth my time. However, if I ever hear that you have stolen from anyone, ever again..."

He trailed off, trying to sound as ominous as possible.

The man nodded, looking relieved, then started gathering up the weapons. Rain walked away to allow him to pile them in the cart without encountering his oversoul. "Do not touch the blanket, just put them on top," he said over his shoulder. With his thoughts, he urged Dozer to remain motionless, unsure if it was even awake.

Rain waited for the man to finish, then briskly walked up to loom behind him. The man whirled, his face going pale as the oversoul washed over him.

"Go," Rain said, and the man bolted like a frightened deer.

Rain shook his head and moved to rearrange the contents of the cart. *At least a broken soul has its uses.*

The man had been carrying three Tel and a handful of copper, but he'd only given up the coins, incorrectly assuming that Rain wouldn't notice. That, plus the assorted cutlery, was far less than what Rain was owed. Luckily for the thief, Rain had more pressing issues to deal with.

Rain knew that he was being too easy on the man, but he couldn't bring himself to care about retribution now that his anger had cooled. At this point, losing the money that the man had stolen from him wasn't anything more than an annoyance. He could easily make more, given how many slimes he could feel in the sewers below his feet. There was simply no point in holding the grudge any further.

He put the thief out of his mind, pulled his hood back up, and resumed plodding toward his destination. Eventually, he came to a stop outside the closed door to the bathhouse, having encountered no more excitement along the way.

Rain looked around, seeing no one on the street outside the building. He, Vanna, Yott, and Tarny had split up after what felt like hours of discussion. The others had gone off to get a few things for the plan they had jointly agreed upon. They would be on their way here to meet him as soon as they finished. Despite the delay, it looked like he was still the first to arrive.

As expected, the door was locked. Rain considered using the lock picks that were still tucked away in the bottom of his pack but discarded the idea almost immediately. He knew how the picking process worked in theory, but he'd never actually done it before.

Unfortunately for the door, he was short on patience at the moment. Rain took a step back, then slammed his shoulder into it, breaking through with a crash of splintering wood. He'd find whoever owned the baths later and pay them for the damage. The weathered door had looked like it had needed replacing anyway.

He looked around guiltily, conscious of the fact that breaking and entering was pretty much exactly what he'd just finished saying not to do. *This is different. I'm not stealing anything, and I will pay for the damage, I swear.*

Satisfied that there were no witnesses to his unprovoked attack on the innocent door, he made his way inside. It took a bit of effort to negotiate the cart through after him, for all that it was designed for tight spaces. It was a mining cart, one of the ones that the workers had been using to transport rubble. Rain had filled it to the brim with the items that he'd recovered, along with the slumbering Dozer. It was rugged enough that the weight of the equipment, the Hefty Maul in particular, wasn't an issue.

He closed the door as best he could—it was still on its hinges at least—then headed toward the archway on the other side of the entry hall.

Passing through the arch, he surveyed the pool itself. It was large, the size of two Olympic swimming pools end to end, though not as deep. The open-roofed building surrounding it was the same as ever. The last time he'd been here, the water in the pool had been frozen in a sheet of ice, but that had melted now, leaving perhaps a half-meter of stagnant water sitting in the open bath.

He kept the cart with him as he moved toward the sluice gate that drained into the sewers. There was a lot of valuable stuff inside, and he didn't want to just leave it all right by the archway where anyone could come in and take things.

There was a wooden walkway over the sluice gate for access to the far side of the pool, which he used to drag the cart to the other side. Also on the far side was the mechanism for controlling the sluice gate. It was a large, heavy, wooden wheel, like you'd expect to find on a sailing ship to haul up an anchor.

Rain kicked free the wooden peg holding the wheel in place, then started hauling at the wheel, raising the gate further. His aching muscles protested at his every motion, but that was hardly anything new. When he was finished, the gate had been raised as high as it could be, pressing against the bottom of the walkway and completely blocking off the outlet.

He pegged the wheel back in place, then took up the cart again and started for the inlet on the complete other side of the building. About halfway there, he stopped near one of the alcoves. They were like little private baths, around the size of a hot tub, but still connected to the main pool. He was pretty sure that this was the same one he had used once before.

He set down the cart's handles, leaving it by the side of the private pool. This would be as good of a spot as any to spend the night, and his stuff would be safe enough here, this far



from the door. He tossed his cloak and his pouches into the cart, then hesitated, looking at the archway almost directly across from him.

No one else had arrived. He was alone. With a sigh, he reached up and took off his helmet, then wiped the sweat from his forehead with Purify. The air was hot and oppressively humid, even at night. A quick flash of Refrigerate took care of that, at least temporarily. He took a few deep breaths, then began removing the rest of his armor.

It was a slow process. First, he removed his right gauntlet, then he twisted the middle finger of his left hand, unlocking the finger from the gauntlet. When he pulled the armored finger away, the ring slipped off to lie against his bare skin.

Next, he transferred the ring from his left middle finger to his right by pressing the tips of the fingers together and tilting his hands. The ring was quite loose, having been designed to fit over the armor. All of this was necessary because he was unwilling to give up the extra health given to him by the Strength. Taking the ring off would have dropped him down to base health again, which would not have been ideal.

In theory, it might be possible to learn to use the ring as long as it was anywhere within the domain of his soul, but that conflicted with his observations thus far. A ring was meant to be worn on a finger, and convincing the system otherwise would take some doing. Just playing along was easier, for now. With the ring safely transferred, he could now remove the rest of his left gauntlet.

Rain looked down at his hands and sighed. *I need to trim my fingernails...*

The pauldrons came off next, and with those removed, Rain was able to remove the metal plates covering his arms. Just twist to detach at the shoulder, then pull the whole metal sleeve

right off. There was another joint at the elbow, but there was no need to do with two steps what you could do with one.

The rest of the bits came off in order. Sabatons, greaves, tassets, fauld, other bits he didn't know the name of, and then finally the cuirass itself. As Tallheart had said, it was possible to get in and out of the armor without assistance, it just took some doing.

Soon enough, Rain was free of the armor and feeling more naked than he'd ever been in his life, for all that he was still wearing the tattered and frayed gambeson. He sighed, then began removing that as well. It was necessary. He had been lying to himself, thinking that he'd just keep wearing the armor indefinitely.

The reality was that the gambeson had never been designed for use with as close-fitting armor as Tallheart had made. The smith had even had to rip the padded garment apart, thinning it down so it would fit beneath the metal plates. Now, the constant friction and wear had damaged it even further. It was practically ragged at this point. The armor had been growing more and more uncomfortable, but Rain had been ignoring it. If not for the healing he'd done using the ring, he suspected that he'd have gotten sores from all the chafing.

He stopped when he got down to his single, long-serving pair of linen briefs. Those were still holding up, thankfully. He inspected himself in the dim moonlight, marveling at the changes to his body. When he'd first woken up in the forest, he'd been a bit flabby from a steady diet of microwaved dinners and beer. Since then, he'd lost weight, he knew, but he'd been wearing the armor for so long that he'd almost forgotten the changes. The last time he'd been without it had been over a week ago.

Now, those changes were even more pronounced. Unbelievably so, in fact. The flab was gone, and his skin looked tight over the outline of wiry muscles. He even had the shadow of abs.

Simply put, he was in the best shape of his life. However, compared to the musclebound adventurers he'd seen running around, he was still scrawny and pathetic. He was taller than most, sure—outliers like Halgrave and Carten aside—but there wasn't really any bulk on his frame to back that up. Even a mage like Jamus probably had him beat simply by having lived a harder life than Rain was used to. Cars and power tools made things too easy.

Also, he couldn't really tell by the dim starlight, but he suspected that his skin had developed a severe case of pale. Wearing armor and a cloak for a month wouldn't have done him any favors there. With his unkempt brown hair, pale skin, long fingernails, and scraggly beard, he suspected he looked more like a meth-addicted scarecrow than anything else.

He pushed aside that image, along with the irrational fear that came from being outside of his armored shell. He still had the ring and the buffer of health that it gave him. Nobody was going to attack him, except maybe Velika, and she had already proven that the armor was barely an inconvenience to her. He left it piled next to the cart, then walked the rest of the way to the inlet.

There was another wooden wheel next to the sluice gate, similar to the last one. Water rushed in from the river in a torrent as Rain cranked it open. The flow continued crashing into the pool in a waterfall even after the gate was fully lowered.

Rain sat on the ground to wait for the pool to fill, tiredly rubbing at his aching muscles. He couldn't stop watching the door at first, worried that someone or something would come after him when he was without his armor. Ameliah was right; he really had developed a complex. That rational knowledge didn't make it any easier to ignore the unease that gnawed at him.

Slowly, his tension began to drain away as the pool filled. The rushing of the water was soothing, and while the situation in the city wasn't great, it wasn't nearly as bad as he had feared. There were still things that he could do. There was still hope. Rain's eyelids felt heavy, and the prospect of sleep was becoming more and more appealing as time went on.

When someone finally did come in, Rain was so startled that he almost fell into the pool in his haste to get to his feet. He relaxed marginally upon seeing that it was just Tarny, accompanied by Wallace, the Guild healer.

Rain took a few deep breaths to recover, then waved to catch their attention. Neither of them seemed to see him in the darkness, so he released a brief pulse of Purify to help them. They were clearly blinded by the torches that they were carrying. Once he was satisfied that they had seen him, he sat back down to wait. By the time they arrived, his heart rate was back down to something approaching normal.

"Well, you look like shit," Wallace said, staring down at him.

"Hey!" shouted Tarny. "Show some respect to Lord Rain. Who are you to—"

"Tarny," Rain said, tiredly. "Give it a rest with all the 'Lord Rain' crap. Wallace is right, I look like something a cat dragged in from outside." He shifted his focus to the healer. "I'm glad you're okay, Wallace. The Guild..."

"Did any of the others survive?" Wallace asked, moving to sit beside him.

Rain shook his head. "No."

"Damn," Wallace said, blowing out a sigh. "That bastard Pemmin owed me money."

"Seriously?" Rain said, incredulous. "They're all dead, and you—"

Wallace scoffed, raising his hand. "Death is inevitable for an adventurer. It's the life we've chosen. I'm a healer, Rain. I've seen death, and so have you. My advice: Try not to think about it, and if that doesn't work, drink heavily."

"That's not very good advice," Rain said, looking up at the stars. The rushing water had faded to a trickle, the pool basically full.

Wallace shrugged. "Beats letting it get to you. Now, what the hells happened to you?"

"Lord Rain was trapped underground for days," Tarny said. "He dug himself out. He cleared more of the tunnel than the work crews, all on his own!"

"I see," Wallace said, looking at Rain speculatively.

Rain shifted uncomfortably, acutely aware of the fact that he was practically naked. "Wallace, there's something wrong with me," he said. "I asked Tarny to find you so you could take a look. I think I injured myself somehow. Do you...feel anything? From me, I mean?"

"Huh?" Wallace said. "What do you mean?" He laid his hand on Rain's bare shoulder. Rain flinched at the sudden contact, then forced himself to relax. Wallace raised an eyebrow at his motion but didn't comment on it.

After a few moments, Wallace shook his head. "You're fine, you whiner. Just normal wear and tear. In fact, you're a lot healthier than you look. Some muscle tears, some bruising, but no broken bones or other major injuries.... Wait..." Wallace's brow furrowed, his grip tightening

on Rain's shoulder. "Huh, no, there's more. Someone else healed you, or you've been abusing scrolls. You're on the edge of the danger zone. If you were hurt, healing you now wouldn't be a great idea."

"I already knew that," Rain said with a sigh. "That's not what I'm talking about. It's something else. You really don't feel it? There should be a sort of pressure, just by standing next to me."

"Nope," Wallace said, taking his hand away. "Not sure what you're on about."

"I still feel it, Lord Rain," said Tarny. "Your power rages like a fire."

Rain opened his mouth to reply, but Wallace beat him to it. "Okay, what's the deal with this guy?" he said, jabbing his thumb at Tarny.

Rain sighed and shook his head. "He thinks I'm secretly a platinum and that I've been hiding my power. The three workers who dug me out all told me that they feel this weird pressure coming from me. They called it oversoul, like in the stories. Obviously I'm not a platinum, but I think I did something to damage my soul. I'm leaking, I guess. You ever hear of anything like that?"

Wallace snorted, then climbed to his feet. "You're both idiots," he said, then looked at Tarny. "You in particular. Rain is a bronzeplate, just like me." He looked back at Rain. "And there's no such thing as oversoul. Not in real life."

"No, you're the idiot," Tarny said, balling up his fists. "Lord Rain will save us. He will defeat the Citizen and—"

"Tarny, enough," Rain snapped, his temper flaring. He pointed. "Go...guard my stuff. I want to talk to Wallace alone."

"But—" Tarny started, but cut off whatever he was going to say as he saw Rain glaring at him. "Yes, my Lord." Rain groaned as the man bowed—actually bowed!—and moved away.

Wallace snorted derisively as the man walked away. "Dulls."

Rain wearily got to his feet, accepting Wallace's offered hand as he tried to put Tarny out of his mind. "So, you really have no idea what it could be?"

"Sorry, Rain," Wallace said. "I don't even believe in all that 'soul' hogwash in the first place. The body is just meat, and that's that. Whatever you're talking about, it's not something I can help you with."

"Damn," Rain said. He sighed deeply, then walked over to the crank and started turning it to block off the inlet. The pool was full, now, practically overflowing.

Wallace moved to help him, grunting with surprise as he took up half of the weight. "Hey, this thing's pretty heavy."

Rain nodded in acknowledgment. He probably had more physical strength than the healer did, thanks to the ring, but that wasn't a conversation he wanted to have at the moment.

"How about you, Wallace? How are you holding up? How are the headaches?"

Wallace grunted. "Not too bad. I've got a full set of Rings now. The Citizen got them for me. With the state she was in, she needed all the help I could give her."

"Has she fully recovered, then?" Rain asked, locking the wheel in place and stepping away.

"How bad was it, exactly?"

"Like a damn meat market," Wallace said. He yawned, covering his mouth with his hand.

"Depths, it's late. Your damn fanboy over there woke me up by pounding on my door for like ten minutes."

"Sorry about that," Rain said. *Ask politely, I said. Damn it, Tarny.* "So, she's..."

"Fine," Wallace grumped. "I saved her leg, and that was the worst of it. It just might not look the prettiest when the bandages come off. Healing goldplates is hard work. Too much damn health."

Rain nodded. "I can imagine."

"Anyway," Wallace said, clasping his hands behind his back. "I can't do anything for whatever it is that you're feeling. I'm tired as shit, and it's way too dam hot out here. My advice for you is to sleep it off." He nodded briskly. "Now, if there's nothing else, I need to be up at the asscrack of dawn to check on the Citizen. She's going to have scars no matter what, but I'm not about to tell her that. She wants me to keep trying, so that's what I'll do. I don't have a death wish."

"Thanks, Wallace," Rain said. "I appreciate it. And good luck."

Wallace nodded, then walked away without even saying goodbye. Rain snorted. The man wasn't much for social graces, but when it really came down to it, he had his heart in the right place. The fact that he'd come at all was proof enough of that.



Before the healer got too far away, Rain activated Essence Well. Tissue Scan wasn't free, and replacing whatever mana Wallace had spent was the least he could do. Wallace paused upon seeing the blue rings, then looked over his shoulder. A rare smile flickered across his face, then he nodded in thanks before continuing toward the arch. Rain kept the spell going until he got out of range.

Once Wallace was gone, Rain looked over at Tarny, who was standing near the cart as ordered. He sighed, running his hands through his hair. *I am going to need to do something about him before he does something ridiculous, like starting a cult in my name. I'll talk to Vanna when she gets here. Maybe she can straighten him out.* Rain shook his head, then looked at the exit to the baths. *What's taking them so long?*

He lowered himself down to sit on the edge of the pool, letting his legs slip into the water. There was a thin film of oil and ash on the surface, but that kind of thing didn't bother him anymore. After going through the Tunnel, it was hard to find something that trivial to be disturbing in the slightest.

The water was tepid, more evidence for the theory Rain had formed concerning the steady increase in the city's temperature. The initial heat had been from the battle between Halgrave and Westbridge, of course, but that wasn't enough to explain why it just kept getting hotter and hotter.

*It has to be the greenhouse effect, after all.*

The dome was clearly a poor conductor of heat. If it hadn't been, it would have felt cold when he'd touched it before, thanks to the winter air on the other side. It didn't block light, however, meaning that the sun would be warming the city each day. Thanks to the dome, the heat would have no easy way to escape.

At least, in theory. Rain wasn't sure if electromagnetism even worked the same way in this universe. Jamus said lightning was under the umbrella of Arcane magic, while light fell under, well, Light. How either of those schools of magic related to electrons, photons, and so forth wasn't something that Rain felt qualified to explain. He'd been studying computer science, not physics or engineering.

The information that overmana gave him was strange and fragmented. For example, he could remember Maxwell's equations perfectly, but he'd be damned if he knew how to use them. All of the context had been lost, including what that weird upside-down triangle meant. When he thought about electromagnetic fields, he saw a frozen image of the equations scrawled on a whiteboard in university physics 101. It had been years since then, and he hadn't exactly used anything from the class since. Construction was all about a practical understanding of physics, not a theoretical one.

*I should have gone back and finished my degree... Rain sighed. Damn it, I distracted myself again. University physics isn't what I need here. I need something a little simpler.*

In the aftermath of Westbridge's attack, Rain's mind had naturally jumped to the greenhouse effect, but he'd discarded that guess in the following days. The temperature had stayed pretty much constant, barring a thermometer to confirm the numbers. Now, however, the warm water had convinced him that he'd been right all along.

The river had started off ice-cold, but that had quite clearly changed. The water—and the earth, he supposed—would have gradually equalized in temperature with the air. That meant that the air was now free to heat up even further, no longer giving all of its energy away to everything else.

The term 'specific heat capacity' had drifted through his mind when he'd been using Immolate to boil Devil Fish. It was disconnected, like a lot of the other random facts that were floating around in there, but he had recognized the speaker. It wasn't university physics, merely high school. That gave him a starting point.

Rain looked around the room, then closed his eyes and fell into a Winter Singularity. He'd found that by concentrating while boosting his overmana to the limit, he could slowly piece together the scattered bits of information floating around his brain into coherent memories, down to the level of remembering a teacher's lecture, word for word. All he needed was a seed, in this case, his old teacher's voice. It made no sense with his understanding of how memory actually worked, but there it was.

After a few minutes, he relaxed, then played back the small segment he had reconstructed. Mr. Rickart's monotonous drone started up in his mind, carrying with it the desire to doodle in class and a vague unease concerning homework.

*"The term for this is 'specific heat capacity.'" Mr. Rickart said, taking the time to write the words on the chalkboard and to underline them. "The specific heat of a substance depends upon its own intrinsic physical properties. At standard temperature and pressure, water has around four times the specific heat of air. If you will recall from last week's discussion on energy, one calorie is defined as the amount of energy required to increase the temperature of one gram of water by one degree centigrade and is equal to..."*

Rain shook his head, freeing teenage thoughts from his mind as his senses returned. He had what he needed for now.

It was somewhat disturbing, how real the memories that he reconstructed this way felt. He didn't just get the lecture, but also his younger self's feelings and thoughts in response to it.

In this case, he'd been paying less attention to the science and more to the way that Mr. Rickart's Adam's apple bobbed up and down when he talked and how he looked like a wizened tortoise wearing a turtleneck sweater.

Rain chuckled at himself. *I was such an idiot back then. Mr. Rickart didn't deserve all of the crap we gave him. Sure, he was a little boring, but at least he cared.*

Rain was disappointed that the ratio between air and water turned out to be four, not like forty or something. Still, it confirmed his hunch. He'd be much better off using Refrigerate while submerged. When combined with the fact that water was around eight hundred times denser than air, it would be three thousand times more effective, more or less. It wasn't a perfect calculation, as liquids did seem to slow down the spread of the aura, but still.

He sighed and rubbed at his eyes, too tired right now to try and calculate how much energy would actually be required to freeze the pool. He'd work on that later when he had some downtime. The conversion ratio between mana and energy seemed like something worth knowing, but there were so many unknowns that calculating it would be a nightmare.

Rain let himself slip into the water, thankful to find that his feet could still touch the bottom, if only just. Purify responded to his will as he made his way toward the center of the pool. The cleansing light of the aura filtered through the water, clearing away the contamination.

Rain took a deep breath and dunked his head below the surface. With his eyes open, he floated, watching the billowing waves of white magic spread. The magical light moved slower in water than it did in air, giving it an eerie, otherworldly feel. It was incredibly calming. He could already feel the tension starting to drain from his tired muscles.

He pushed himself back to the surface to breathe, then rolled over to float on his back. It would be nice to just stay like this for a while. To have no worries. No obligations. No fear.

He regretfully let his feet sink to the bottom, then flared Purify into a Nova. The white shell of magic raced away from him as he switched to Refrigerate. He'd come here for a purpose. Cooling down the city was a good end goal, but he was unsure if it would actually be possible at this point. For all he knew, even if every single person with a cold-aspect spell spent every last shred of their mana for days on end, it still might not be enough.

He was confident, however, that he'd be able to manage this pool. He would create a refuge against the heat that gripped the city. A sanctuary. Clean, cool water, available for everyone.

He'd sent Vanna to round up the other work crews, and Yott to secure supplies, barrels in particular. The bathhouse was large, but it wasn't big enough to fit everyone in the city. His plan, for now, was to have the workers fill the barrels with chilled water and distribute them. He could even make ice to keep them cool, as evidenced by the thin layer that was already forming on the surface.

The temperature of the water was dropping rapidly, even with the low intensity of Refrigerate. As he'd learned in the Fells, while the spell spread slightly slower in water than it did in air, it was no less effective. He lacked the tools to make accurate measurements of the rate of change; all he knew was that it was damn fast.

He gasped as the increasingly frigid water sucked the heat from his body. The layer of ice on the surface was starting to thicken, creeping in toward him, and the water below was transforming into a slush of rapidly growing crystals. He refused to relent, trusting his boosted Endurance to protect him. His cold resistance was currently 2.6 times that of a normal human,

assuming that it worked that way when it came to physical temperature. That resolve didn't last long, however.

*Holy shitballs, that's cold!*

Rain switched to Immolate, fighting against the violent shivers that wracked his body as he compressed the radius. He didn't want to undo all of the work he had just done, only to stop himself from freezing to death.

The water around him rapidly began to warm, but his body was slower to react to the respite. He got himself moving toward the other end of the pool, still shivering as he melted a channel through the thin sheet of ice.

"Amazing," Tarny said in awe. The man's voice carried easily over the ice to Rain's enhanced ears.

Rain smiled. *Magic rocks.*

He kept going until the shivering had stopped, and he started feeling uncomfortably warm instead. Then, he repeated the Purify Nova and switched back to Refrigerate.

It took many repetitions of this process, including a few pauses to recover with Winter, but he eventually reached the far end. It had taken almost four mana pools to do it, but the entire volume of the water had been chilled to zero degrees, more or less. A thick layer of slush floated on the surface, gradually locking up into solid ice. The air, too, was glacial, the walls of the bathhouse serving to contain the pocket of arctic chill.

Rain hauled himself out of the water and glanced at the group of people working to fill barrels. Vanna had arrived with two other work crews, having recruited them with the money Rain had given her. Yott had shown up with a fourth crew, and a wagon full of barrels. Even more people had arrived since, that being Tarny's doing. The man had left while Rain had been working, saying that he'd needed to get his cloak. When he'd returned, he'd had another group of workers with him, all of them wearing heavy clothing against the chill.

Rain had spoken to Tarny briefly when he'd returned, needing to clarify the pecking order for this little operation before it became a problem. It went Rain, then Vanna, then Yott and Tarny, then everyone else. It seemed to be working well enough for the moment.

"Here," Yott said, approaching and handing him a fluffy towel. "I found this in the storeroom."

"Thanks, Yott," Rain said, wrapping himself in the towel. "Did you get—"

He broke off as she pointed to a wicker basket, sitting on the edge of the pool a little ways away. "There's a whole chicken in there, plus roast vegetables, beer, and bread. Sorry, none of it's warm."

Rain beamed at her. "Thanks, Yott, you're amazing. I don't care if it's cold. Did you know that the Watch has these biscuits that are even worse than Guild rations? They're softer, but they taste even more like cement."

Yott shrugged.

"Never mind," Rain said. "How much do I owe you?"

Yott shook her head. "It's fine." She gestured at the frozen pool. "That is enough, and not just for me. I suspect everyone here feels the same."

"Nonsense," Rain said. "Let's call it two Tel. Remind me later."

"That's too much," Yott said, trailing off as Rain grabbed the basket and headed for the wooden walkway. She didn't follow him, and it wasn't just because he'd asked everyone to stay on this side of the pool.

For all that Yott said she had gotten used to his supposed oversoul, he could tell that it still made her a little uncomfortable.

*That's tomorrow's problem.*

He looked over his shoulder, waved, then turned his attention to the basket. It smelled amazing. He resisted until he reached the spot where he'd left the cart and his armor, then eagerly dug out a piece of chicken. He bit into it, then sighed in delight. *Finally.*

He fell asleep before he even finished his meal, wrapped warmly in his cloak and using the tattered remains of his gambeson as a pillow.