

## 72: Preemption

In Jarro, something unusual was happening. The trade complex was quiet. Normally, the area would be busy with the arguing of merchants and the coming and going of laborers. Instead, the area was deserted. The Bank officials that would have normally overseen the day-to-day operations of the complex were gathered together, standing unnaturally motionless.

Uniformed guards with the crossed swords of Jarro embroidered on their leather armor formed a wall, screening the area from the public. This was official DKE business. No one was to be allowed in.

In the center of the trade complex was the teleportation platform. There were two figures standing upon it, an older man and a young woman. Simply by standing there, they prevented any inbound transport. The woman was dressed for battle, wearing two swords on one hip and another, longer one on the other. That was without even mentioning the massive blade strapped to her back. The man was wearing a tailored jacket of expensive green fabric and dark pants. He had four golden rings on the fingers of each of his hands, as well as two small golden studs, one piercing each ear. The symbol embroidered on the back of the jacket in gold thread was not that of Jarro that the guards wore. It was something else, an owl. This symbol was his own.

Hanging before them in the air there was a distortion, like a pool of water. Through the rippling surface of the pool, a city could be seen from on high, as if viewed by a bird. Smoke curled up from the chimneys of the city, creating an obscuring haze. Nevertheless, people could still be seen moving on the ground. Detail was difficult to make out at this distance, but the two watchers had vision sharp enough to pick out individuals from the crowd.

The woman tapped her foot impatiently. The man simply watched. He had learned the value of patience. He would wait until the opportune moment.

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Elsewhere in Jarro, a blond-haired woman spoke quietly to the barman of a tavern called the Smoky Tail. It was an old establishment, and the owner knew her by name. The clientele here were people of importance, rich merchants and influential bureaucrats. It was a good place to get information about the doings of the various noble families in the city, as well as within the DKE at large. It was here that Ameliah heard a rumor that made her blood run cold.

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In Fel Sadanis, Rain stared up at the sign hanging over the doorway to a stone building. The shop looked out of place, nestled amid the upscale homes of this part of the city. The name of the shop was painted on the sign in a fancy script and, like most other shops, it featured icons indicating what the shop sold for the benefit of the illiterate. In this case, there were two, the potion bottle that indicated a chemist, and the bar of gold for an alchemist. It was the alchemist that Rain was here to see.

Fifth bell rang in the distance as he shifted the heavy sack that hung over his shoulder. He looked down from the sign. *Myth and Reason, huh? This is definitely the place. Myth is the alchemist that this crap is for according to the posting. Is he a chemist, too, or is there some dude in there who calls himself Reason? Seems a bit over the top, but hey, whatever works. I used to get my hair cut at a place called 'curl up and dye', after all.*

He shrugged the sack off his shoulder and let it fall to hang at his side. *Damn moss is heavy.* He pushed open the door and entered, looking up at a familiar, yet unexpected jingle. There was a bell hanging on a spring over the door.

"One moment!" came a female voice. "I'll be right with you."

The woman was standing at a wooden workbench with her back to him. The room was lined with shelves filled with glass bottles, metal tins, and odds and ends of every description. There was a counter between him and the woman, but he didn't have time to walk over to it before he was attacked by a whirling mass of white fur.

Excited barks filled the air as the dog bounced up and down. Rain had reflexively activated Force Ward but he slowly relaxed as he realized what was going on. *Is that a Samoyed? No, it's too big. It looks like a puppy, but it's enormous. Just to be sure...* He activated Detection, scanning for monsters. His scan came up clean. It was just a normal puppy, just very, very large. He held out his armored hands to ward off the excited canine. "Hey, hello there. Good dog. Easy!"

The woman laughed, still focused on whatever she was working on. "Oh, don't mind him. He's harmless. Come on, *Cloud*, stop bothering the customer."

Rain smiled. *Cloud, huh? Good name for him...wait, that was English.* His smile widened into a grin. "Ah, so this is the cloud Jamus was talking about. It all makes sense now."

The woman froze and looked over her shoulder. She did a double-take when she saw his armor. "You know Jamus?" she asked, recovering quickly and turning to face him.

Rain nodded. "Yup. I take it you do too. Unless...this *is* your dog, right?"

"Yes, he's mine. *Cloud*, down!" The puppy ignored her, its nails scrabbling against Rain's armor as it tried to climb him. "Sorry, I only just started training him. You must be the one Jamus mentioned. The one who speaks the really weird language. Hi, I'm Meloni, oh, oops, hang on." She had extended a hand to him over the counter, but it was covered in a sticky greenish

substance. She turned back to the workbench and peeled off her gloves. Rain blinked. They looked like they made of thick rubber instead of leather. *Staavo said they didn't have rubber...*

She turned back to face him. She was a tallish middle-aged woman, around 40 or so by his estimate. She had greying hair that had once been brown and was wearing a green high-collared dress. She offered him her hand again. "There, sorry. Hello."

Rain shook her hand, still fighting off the puppy attack with his other arm. "Hello. It's nice to meet you, Meloni. I'm Rain."

"Rain..." she said his name carefully. "I like it. What's it mean?"

"What, Rain?" he shrugged. "It's just my name. My middle name, technically, but I've hated my first name since I was young. Kids can be vicious, you know? 'Rain' means 'rain', as in precipitation. I've gotten teased plenty for that one too. At least it was my choice."

"In what language?" Meloni asked.

Rain paused. "Jamus didn't say?"

She shook her head. "So, you're a noble or something where you come from?"

"What makes you say that?" Rain asked, looking down at his armor. "That's the third time today. Why does everyone think I'm a noble?"

Meloni smiled. "Well, the outfit is a dead giveaway for one. You don't often hear of nobles joining the guild, but that armor must have cost..." she whistled. "More importantly, you said

'Rain' was your middle name. That means you have at least three. I've never heard of anyone who wasn't a noble having a use for more than one."

*Huh. He tilted his head. Now that I think about it, she's got a point. Other than Velika, all the people I know just have one. I hadn't even thought about it.*

He shrugged. The dog was still bouncing up and down excitedly. He knelt down, fending it off as it went for his face. "I'm not a noble," he said, trying to keep the wet tongue away from him. It was a losing battle. He didn't have his helmet to protect him as it was currently tied to his waist.

"Your common is very good," Meloni said, watching him play with Cloud. "Where did you say you were from?"

"I didn't," Rain said, standing. He resisted the urge to use Purify to clean the dog slobber off his face. *Who knows where that tongue has been. It'll be fine. I'll take care of it later.* He looked back at Meloni. "What did Jamus tell you about me, exactly?"

Meloni laughed. "Not much. He said you were secretive."

Rain smiled. *Good.* "I'm not, really. I just have trust issues. The first people I met when I came to this city tied me up like a chicken. Hey, get out of there, that's not for you!" Rain pulled the sack away from the dog.

"Cloud, come! Sit!" Meloni said sternly. The puppy ignored her of course, snuffling at the burlap sack. Rain hoisted it out of range and set it on the counter. "Here, this is for Myth."

"Bip!" the woman hollered in the direction of a curtained doorway. "Your nasty sewer moss is here!"

*Bip?*

The curtain parted and a man stepped out. He was tall and lanky with striking blue eyes and neat blond hair. His nose and mouth were obscured by the high circular collar of his white coat. He was dressed all in white, in fact, the coat falling to his ankles. It flared out at his hips, revealing a pair of white pants and white boots beneath. The coat buttoned up along the left side of his chest, rather than in the center. *Well, he certainly looks the part.*

Another man followed him into the room, slightly shorter and stockier and with dark hair and eyes. He was dressed in a matching outfit, except all in black. His coat was mirrored, buttoning up on the right side instead of the left. Rain smiled. *This must be Myth and Reason. Fitting. Gotta say, I think I really like the theme they've got going here.*

"There you are," Meloni said. "What were you two doing back there? Just waiting to make your entrance, I'll bet."

The man in the white coat sighed and turned to face her. "Meloni, what have I told you about talking to us like that in front of people?" He had a strange accent, clipping his words oddly and accentuating the consonants.

Meloni laughed in his face. "And what have I told *you* about those jackets? Nobody is going to want to buy potions from someone if they can't even see their face. The strange and mysterious look is all well and good, but—"

"Meloni, enough," said the man in black. He turned to face Rain. "Welcome to Myth and Reason. I," he took a bow, "am Reason. Please pay no mind to our assistant. You have something for us?" His accent was identical to the first man's.

Rain fought to control his smile and nodded at the sack. "One bag of damp sewer moss, as ordered." He fished out the quest posting, placing it on the counter. "I just need your signature. Actually his, I suppose," he nodded to Myth.

Reason nodded, opening the bag and inspecting the contents. He seemed to consider, then inclined his head. "The terms have been fulfilled, and thus the work shall bear fruit."

*What?*

Reason lifted the bag and stepped over the excited Cloud, heading for the curtained doorway. "Myth will see to your document. Go with my thanks. He who labors brings enlightenment to us all." He disappeared through the curtain.

*Okay?* Rain scratched his head. He turned to Myth, hoping for an explanation about whatever the heck that just was. Myth was in the process of signing Rain's quest slip, having produced a massive feathered pen from nowhere. Rain blinked. There was no pot of ink. "Is that a magic pen?" he asked, pointing at it. The pen vanished with a wave of the man's hand. "Perhaps."

Meloni punched him and looked at Rain. "Yes, it is. Writes without ink. Alchemical. The tip transmutes the color of whatever you write on. We sell them, in fact. Twenty Tel apiece. Interested?"

Myth rubbed at his shoulder, looking insulted. "Meloni, you're ruining my mystique."

She snorted. "Your mystique doesn't pay the rent. How much do you two owe to the Bank, again?"

Rain smiled. *This place is great. It is exactly what a fantasy shop is supposed to be like, not like that crappy store over by the Guild. Is that a frog in that jar over there? Why would anyone buy that? What is the possible use?*

Myth sighed. His eyes looked old and tired, though Rain was sure he was younger than he was. Probably early 20s, by his guess. The collar made it hard to tell. "Fine, Meloni, fine. Yes, it is a magic pen, and yes, I can make you one. Honestly, woman, just let me do my thing. I was going to get there eventually."

Cloud whined. Nobody was paying attention to him. Rain reached down to scratch his ears then straightened facing Myth. "Well, I can't say that I can really justify spending that much on a pen. I've got a pencil that works perfectly well. Maybe some other time. While I'm here, though, do you sell any potions or scrolls or anything? Maybe something that boosts resistances?"

Myth spread his arms wide, taking a breath, but Meloni cut him off. "Why yes, we do. I have healing potions at 10 Tel apiece, and a selection of alchemical oils that you could apply to your armor to provide resistance against the elements. Heat, cold, force, even arcane, though that last one is quite expensive. Myth is the only one around here capable of making it."

Myth looked surprised as he turned to her. "You used my name," he said in a pleased voice.

"Quiet, Bip, I'm working here," she said, glancing at him. "So, Rain. What will it be? Fancy a potion?"



"Humm," Rain said, smiling at the interplay. "I suppose I could do with a few healing potions."  
*No way I'm paying ten Tel though.* "The price is just a little..."

"Ridiculous," Myth said, completing Rain's sentence. "Meloni, I have told you, they do not cost nearly that much to make. You are trying to overcharge him."

Meloni rolled her eyes. "Useless. Fine. 5 Tel. Happy?"

Myth shook his head. "Two would be more than enough. Reason does not need more than a single cryst to make an entire batch of the weak ones. Even the higher-tier potions only require..."

"Shut. Up. Bip," Meloni said. "And you wonder why you're in debt."

Rain opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by an explosion of sound and a tremor that shook the room. Everyone cried out in alarm as the shaking continued, fading after a few seconds.

"What the hells was that!" came Reason's voice from behind the curtain, all pretense of mysticism discarded. Cloud was barking in alarm.

"An earthquake?" Meloni asked, looking at the mess in the room. Many bottles had fallen from the shelves, though none had broken somehow.

"No," Myth said, looking at the door. "That was something else."

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Earlier and on the other side of Fel Sadanis, Val was standing in line impatiently. He was in a bad mood, mostly due to the fact that he was currently inside one of the four Watch strongholds in Fel Sadanis. It had him on edge. He didn't like the Watch, but there was no help for it. This is where he had to be if he wanted to get paid.

"Move," he said, pushing the bound man up to the desk. The family in front of them had finally left. Val hadn't cared enough to listen to whatever it was that they were complaining to the officers about, focused on his own situation. He pushed his captive again, harder this time as punishment for his refusal to move. The man stumbled and crashed into the desk, making the officers sitting there jump to their feet.

"Shit, my tea!" exclaimed the one on the left, scrambling to save a stack of papers from the spilled beverage. "Watch it!" he said, angrily, glaring at Val.

Val sighed. *Damn, I didn't notice the tea.* He shook his head. *Great, now I pissed them off.*

"Sorry about that. I'm just in a bit of a rush. I'm here for the bounty on this idiot," he said, pulling his captive back to stand next to him.

"Damn it, this is going to stain," the tea-covered officer said, brushing at his pants. The other officer looked at him apologetically, then turned his attention to Val. "Alright, don't worry about it. Who is this supposed to be?" he asked, nodding at the prisoner. "And who are you?"

"I'm Val," Val said, pulling off his guild plate and tossing it to the man. "And as for this guy, I don't know his name. He matches the picture, though." He fished in a pocket and pulled out the poster. It wasn't a Guild quest. The Guild didn't trouble itself with this sort of thing. This was a wanted poster he'd collected from another of the Watch's strongholds. The big one near the west gate had a job board for things like this, as well as anything else the residents of Fel Sadanis wanted to post. The Watch didn't manage the board like the Guild did, leaving it

up to the posters to sort out their own affairs. In this case, though, the Watch had been the ones doing the posting.

"Humm," the officer said, turning to his companion. "Vaast, where's the book?"

Vaast pointed at a shelf behind the desk. "Third shelf, Kellen. You should know this by now. Damn it, I'm going to go get a cloth. Why does this always happen to me after the aides have gone home?" He got up from the desk and walked away, muttering to himself.

Val waited while Kellen retrieved the book and flipped through it, eventually finding a page bearing the same sketched image of the man standing despondently in front of his desk. The officer peered at the page, then up at the man. "You're Korral?"

The man shook his head. The officer frowned. "Lie." He looked at the man. "You are Korral." It wasn't a question. The man closed his eyes and slumped down, defeated. He nodded.

Val shivered. The Watch officers were fucking spooky. Every last one of them had some way of telling truth from lies, despite there being no skill to his knowledge that would allow such a thing. He wasn't sure if it was something that they had been taught or some artifact that each of them possessed. All he knew was that he'd have rarely seen one of them be wrong. The sentinels were even worse. Their insight was uncanny.

"Very well," the officer said, speaking to Val. "We will take him. The bounty is 100 copper."

Val sighed. The low sum hardly made it worth his trouble. He'd collected all of the postings for minor criminals in the city on a whim, looking for something to do. The Guild hadn't had any quests available when he'd checked the past few days. He hadn't found Rain or Jamus, either, despite searching. They were probably staying with Tallheart outside the city, but he needed

to make money, not spend a week lazing about in the forest. Getting his father's jacket repaired had been expensive, leaving him practically broke despite the sudden windfall from the lair. He couldn't even afford the two Tel for a bunk, making it difficult to get a good quest. He'd take whatever he could get.

"Humm," the officer said, looking at a leather-bound book. "Val, Bronzeplate, Adventurer's Guild, identification number 302-12221. Issued in Ellum. You're quite a ways away from home."

"So?" Val said. The other officer was returning, cloth in hand.

Kellen shrugged. "So nothing. Just saying. Our last record of you is dated over two years ago. It places you at category 2. Has that changed?"

Val shook his head. "I don't need to tell you anything."

Kellen narrowed his eyes. "You do if you want your bounty."

"Nope," Val said. "There's the criminal, as ordered. Just give me the reward. It doesn't matter who I am." He snatched his guild plate up of the desk, slipping it into a pocket. The cord had broken in the scuffle with the man he'd captured. He'd had to subdue him physically, not being stupid enough to actually blast someone in the city.

Vaast shook his head, mopping up the spilled tea. "If you weren't awakened, fine, we'd let you get away with that. But you are, and we need to know what you can do. It's policy. You have to tell us if you want to do business with us in any way. Relax, it's just a question or two. We'll find out, one way or another. Just answer, then you can get paid."

"Fuck that," Val said, turning to walk out. *This was a bad idea and a waste of time. I'll get money some other way. Fuck, if I could find Rain we could go slime hunting. No fucking way I'm digging through slimes for Tel without that aura of his.* He looked over at the prisoner, then sighed. "Keep him. I don't care." *There goes 100 copper. I'm not telling them a damn thing.*

"Stop," Kellen said. "You can't just leave like that."

"Watch me," Val said, making his way to the door. He swore as a woman in a red robe opened it before he got there. *Shit, that's a silverplate. A sentinel.*

The sentinel stopped, glaring at him coldly, then looked over at the prisoner and the two officers. She raised an eyebrow. "Bounty?" she asked.

"Yes, Sentinel Lamida," Kellen said. "Don't let him get past you. He's refusing assessment. I think he's hiding something."

"Shit," Val cursed as the woman's gaze returned to him.

"Why?" she said.

Val fought back his instinct to make a run for it. That wouldn't end well for him. Neither would fighting. Now that a sentinel was here, he was basically fucked. It all depended on whether this Lamida wanted to make an issue of it.

At his silence, Lamida frowned. To his surprise, she stepped aside. "Fine. Go."

"Sentinel, you're sure?" Vaast said, rising from his seat. The sentinel shook her head. "We have bigger problems at the moment, officer Vaast. There's been an incident at the teleportation

platform." She turned her attention back to Val. "Go on, get out of here. I've already dealt with one idiot adventurer today, I don't have the patience for another. Leave, before I—"

The sentinel was interrupted as the room shook, a massive concussion rattling the shutters. The earth quaked below their feet, forcing Val to take a step to steady his balance.

"Damn," Lamida swore. "Out of time. Kellen, Vaast, come with me." She turned to look at the prisoner, standing meekly by the desk, arms still bound. "You better still be here when we get back."

Val ignored them. It was time to get gone. *What the hells was that?* He ducked out of the office, hurrying from the Watch's stronghold. Officers were streaming out of the barracks like bees from a kicked hive. He quickened his pace, heading in the direction of the sound. Unless a fallen star had struck the city, or a dragon had come out of nowhere, a crash like that could only mean one thing. There was someone strong here. Someone very strong. He had a guess for who that might be based upon recent events at the Guild.

*Lavarro versus Halgrave. I've got to see this.* He missed a step as he felt a massive pulse of *something* flow through the city. The rune representing his mana flickered, dimming as his regeneration all but stopped. He looked at it in alarm. *That's not good...* A new glyph suddenly appeared, one he had never seen before. It was a message, and what it was saying was simply impossible.

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Back in Jarro, just after the striking of fifth bell, lightning flared and cracked as the charge built up within the platform. Citizen Westbridge waited patiently, still watching through the scrying pool he'd summoned. Satisfied, he dismissed it with a thought, the view of Fel Sadanis

vanishing. The Watch sentinels guarding the teleportation platform had been pulled away, to what purpose, he did not know. It did not matter. In fact, it would have hardly mattered even had they remained. However, he did not like to take unnecessary risks.

He did not know the full capabilities of each of the thirty-seven sentinels that he had seen in and around the city. If more than a few were toward the upper end of the range, it would be problematic to confront a group of them all at once. It would cause a delay. Unfortunately, he could not measure their strength through the window of his spell. For all that it was a valuable tool for seeing long distances, Scrying Pool was not technically a sensory skill. Mana Sight would only show him the construct itself, not what it was displaying beneath the surface.

"Old gods, this thing seems like its being even slower than usual. Come on already!" the woman next to him complained. Westbridge sighed. *I cannot believe she is the best we could find.* "Be ready," he said, looking at his impatient companion. "Five seconds. Do not forget your role."

The charge built to a peak and the world disappeared in white. Westbridge stood at ease as his senses twisted and warped. The feeling could be disorienting to those who had never experienced it before. He would never let it show, of course, but he was particularly sensitive to it. He didn't often leave Westbridge, and he didn't have the tolerance he once had in his youth. He kept his face stern. It would last but a moment.

The whiteness disappeared with a muffled clap of thunder, bolts of lightning falling unnaturally like water and expanding in a ring around their feet. The Fel Sadanis teleportation complex came into view and he immediately stepped forward, striking the Watch officer who'd come to challenge them. The man froze as Westbridge's hand touched his chest. The spell would only last for a few hours, but until then, the man would remain there, unaware,

and as still as a statue. The temporal lock induced by the Stasis spell was powerful. It targeted the unfortunate officer's soul, sealing him within a bubble of altered time.

Westbridge's companion was a little less restrained. The head of the second Watch officer fell to the ground with a wet thump, her body crumpling. Westbridge frowned. He moved quickly; there was not much time. He knelt to straighten the woman's body and collect her head. He placed it back on her neck and concentrated, speaking quickly.

"What was done, be undone. That which was severed, be restored. The blood that has frozen, let it flow once more. By the power of my soul, be healed. Greater Restoration."

Light flashed and the officer gasped. She thrashed, clawing at her neck until Westbridge froze her as well. He stood, the woman's blood sliding off the fabric of his suit as if repelled. He turned to look at his companion. "Velika, I told you not to kill any members of the Watch. We cannot afford the backlash it would cause. That goes for the Guild and the Bank as well."

Velika sniffed. "You think not killing any of them will prevent that? They're going to lose their shit once they realize what we're planning."

"You will obey my commands, Velika. You are not a Citizen. Not yet. I am in command."

"Fine," Velika said. "I don't see why the assembly didn't just raise me back in Jarro. So what if I need a city first? I'll have one in a few minutes."

Westbridge shook his head. *At least she isn't as bad as her mother was.* He sighed. "For the record, Velika, I do not approve of your elevation, no matter how I vote in the coming confirmation. I supported your aunt to take up the mantle of Kallias, not you. Had we any



other recourse, I would not choose you for this duty. It sets a dangerous precedent, having two Citizens from the same family.”

Velika glared at him. Her disdain rolled off him as the blood had, finding no purchase for it to sink in. He looked around. The sun was setting and the area was quiet. He’d made sure of that before triggering the Majistraal platform. He looked at Velika. “Secure the area. Block all inbound and outbound destinations as I showed you, then disable the link to the charging matrix. I will meet you back here in fifteen minutes. No one gets out. You should be undisturbed. Once I find the barrier stone, I will activate it immediately as planned.”

“Get going, old man. Don’t make me wait any longer.”

Westbridge ignored her jab. Yes, he was old. She was young, and it showed. He’d seen her like before. She was barely able to keep control of her own impulses. Giving her domain over Fel Sadanis was the height of folly; however, the DKE had decided the city needed to be taken, and the city could not be taken without raising a new Citizen to rule over it. Velika was the only option, the only suitably-minded person strong enough to withstand the implantation.

The rules laid out by his great grandmother were clear. No citizen could rule over more than one city. That was what had led Westbridge to war, time and time again. His great grandmother had ruled over the city as queen before the unification. She had been the first Citizen Westbridge, and he was not about to sully that legacy just because he disagreed with the DKE’s decision. Velika’s confirmation vote would be unanimous, as every Citizen’s always was.

He put the selfish upstart out of his mind. This was no time to be distracted. “The wind is the breath of the world, ever-flowing agent of change. I am of the wind, and it is by my will that

my essence is bent upon my self. By my own power, I am uplifted. By my own agency, I am unbound. Flight.”

As he spoke the final word, his feet left the stone. He rose slowly, directing himself with his thoughts. The incantation was not strictly necessary. He had more than enough power to get the effect he wanted without the boost that Chanting provided. However, he found the metamagic helped him focus his thoughts, above and beyond the numerical boost that it lent. Many mages eschewed Chanting altogether. Such mages were fools. Every advantage was meant to be taken. Ignoring one as basic as this just because it was inconvenient was unforgivable.

“Fucking nonsense,” Velika said as he rose into the sky. “What the hells does that even mean, ‘my essence is bent upon my self’? You could at least do me the courtesy of using some random mumbo-jumbo like a normal mage. Now I’m going to be trying to puzzle out that spiritual bullshit the whole time you’re gone.”

Westbridge ignored her, shooting up into the sky rapidly, but not so rapidly that he left thunder in his wake. She would learn in time, or she would not. He had more important things to concern himself with than her opinion. She was not even a mage. That had been another requirement for her selection.

As he rose over the city, he looked down upon it, scanning for any sign that he had been seen. A small boy pointed at him, tugging on his mother’s skirt, and a lone fisherman dropped his pole in surprise. Nobody of importance. It was fortunate that people so rarely looked up. Still, it would not do to tarry. Their intrusion would not remain undetected for long. For all he knew, the Watch was already aware. He did not want to rely on Velika to secure the platform on her own. Fortunately, he would soon give the defenders of the city something else to worry about.

He activated Mana Sight with a thought, an entirely new spectrum of colors overlaying itself onto his vision. He always perceived mana of course, but he was looking for more than the ambient flows of the energy through the air. It was a shame that the skill was channeled. Unlike Flight, which had a set duration, he could not use Chanting to enhance it further. Channel Mastery was an acceptable substitute.

Boosted by his will, the eddies and smears of mana that flowed through the city sharpened. Even from this height, he could see the pimples on the face of the fisherman as he pointed up at him gesturing wildly. With the addition of Mana Sight, he could make out the soft glow of the man's soul as it flowed around him as well. The peasant wouldn't even be aware that he had a soul, weak as it was.

Westbridge shook his head. *Sad.* He scanned the city, picking out the souls of the eighteen Watch sentinels that were inside the walls, shining bright by comparison. He also marked the souls of the four Adventurer's Guild silverplates, and the one Bank enforcer, deep within the organization's shielded vault. He needed to activate Unveiled Sight to see the last, their building having been ensorcelled to prevent just what he was attempting. Such shoddy spellwork was but a minor inconvenience before his all-seeing gaze.

He nodded to himself. There was no threat here beyond the lone goldplate, his soul shining like the sun compared to the stars that were the others. The background glow of the unawakened wasn't even worth mentioning. He already had a plan for Halgrave. There would be no surprises.

Just as he thought this, a glow caught the corner of his eye, not from within the city, but from a forest to the east. There was a powerful soul there, but it was shrouded somehow. He

couldn't get an accurate lock on it. *No matter. It will not be of any consequence in a few moments.*

He sharpened his focus further, using Piercing Gaze to pair back the roofs, then the buildings, then even the ground. He stared deep, searching the sewers below the city. He saw the Lair as a bubble of impenetrable magic, blobby and misshapen. He could not see past its border, but that was not a problem. It was not the Lair he was after. It was the other bubble of magic that he was interested in.

The Lair's boundary swirled with corrupted green mana, indicative of a Chemical alignment. The Lair's barrier was a wall that separated it from the outside world. It was a natural phenomenon. The barrier that he was looking for was anything but natural, and it had been made not to divide, but to conceal.

He searched methodically, tracing the countless strands of ambient mana as they twisted through the earth. He was looking for a small distortion. The Majistraal were skilled. It would not appear as a barrier like the Lair, nor even a void in the ambient mana. They had been better than that. However, there would be certain signs that—*Ah, there we go.*

With a thought, he activated his DKE implant, forming a telepathic link to each and every one of the Citizens. They would already be watching, of course, but it was his duty to inform them nonetheless. He kept the thread narrow, not wishing to form a full connection. This was just an update, not a vote. A simple message would do.

[This is Citizen Westbridge. I have confirmed the presence of the artifact. Proceeding with phase two.]

He allowed himself to rise further into the sky, maintaining his focus on the spot he'd noticed as it shrank away. He stopped after a few moments, satisfied that he had sufficient height. He directed his thoughts downward, canceling his upward momentum and inverting it, flinging himself at the ground. He fell like a stone. No, faster than a stone. The air shuddered as he passed the speed of sound, accelerating faster and faster toward the rapidly approaching ground. He would need the speed to penetrate the earth. He struck the ground with the force of a falling star, destroying several buildings and sending a blast wave out through the city.

He had made sure that there were no awakened near his entry point. As for the unawakened, it was regrettable, but it could not be helped. There were no tunnels leading to where he was going. The ground parted before him, giving him no more trouble than the air had as he tore the stone asunder with his passage. He canceled his remaining momentum, falling lightly to the floor of the chamber that he had known would be there. He was not concerned about breaking the artifact itself. He doubted that such a thing would even be possible for anyone short of the gods. All of the Majistraal's cities had been wiped from the face of the planet in their terrible civil war, yet the teleportation platforms had survived. There was no reason to expect that the barrier stone would be any different. The artifact itself would be as close to indestructible as it was possible to get.

He stood, dusting himself off. The wet earth and powdered stone fell away easily, leaving him pristine once more, his jacket not even ruffled. He was operating on limited time now. His entrance had hardly been subtle. He conjured light, though he did not need it, looking at the obelisk that stood before him. This was what he was here for, the construct that the Majistraal had used to protect their way station. It had not been enough to save it from destruction. There were more like it under a few other old cities in the DKE, the presence of the ones that had never been used a tightly kept secret due to the tactical advantage that they represented. He had known that this one would be here. It was more than just a hunch. He was something of an expert.

Just because it was easy for him to find, it did not mean others could, however. There were rumors of its existence, of course, just as there were rumors of ancient Majistraal secrets below every city with a teleportation platform. Those rumors would be confirmed today. There would be no hiding what was to come. It struck Westbridge as a waste, using it this way, but the DKE had decided. He was bound to execute their collective will.

He reached out, laying his hand upon it. It took but a thought to form a connection, the pathways of the Majistraal spellwork unfurling in his mind like finely woven lace. A lesser mage would have been driven mad instantly. Many had, and from much less powerful constructs than this. He took his time, making sure to familiarize himself with the controls before activating it. The obelisk helped him, guiding his understanding. He marveled once more at the mastery of the ancient order of mages as he modified the list of residents for the city, scrolling past the names of thousands of long-dead Majistraal and adding his own to the end, as well as one other. He was only allowed to do this because of the failsafe the Majistraal added to all their technology. If there were no living users, anyone could gain control, provided that their mind could handle the strain. His could.

The barrier stone was a marvel. It was not like the Majistraal platform above. That had been designed for anyone to use. This was something else entirely. This was designed for the defense of a nation. He smiled as he activated the final enchantment. He felt more than saw the mana in the room swirl as it was sucked into the obelisk. The field extended, drawing in all the ambient mana in the city to fuel the ancient Majistraal artifact. It did not stop there. Though he was an approved resident, he was not exempt from the magic that fueled the barrier as it sprung into existence around the city. He felt the draw on his own mana as the artifact stole his regeneration to power itself, like a leech feeding upon his soul. It was as if he had no more arcane resistance than the hapless fisherman above. He did not need to know how it worked to appreciate such craftsmanship. This was what spellwork was meant to be.

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"Wait here," Halgrave said, stepping through the door. He'd hurried down here immediately after he'd felt the ground shake. He knew what it meant. The impossible message that had appeared in his mind when the barrier activated was further confirmation. The city had been attacked.

On the ground floor of his mansion, there was a room that served a singular function. There was but one entrance, and that was warded. As Halgrave entered, light blossomed from the enchantments lining the walls. This was no mere byproduct of the enchantments themselves, this was light in its pure form, created by runes cast in rare crystal for that very purpose. Such things were not often seen in Fel Sadanis. The materials required to support a light-based enchantment were rare in general and the abundance of cheap chem-crysts made evertorches a much cheaper alternative.

That was nothing compared to what stood in the center of the room. There, upon a plinth of reinforced iron, rested a hammer. The head was made of a dark crystal, black as night. A worldly traveler might have identified it as volcanic obsidian. They would have been wrong. The head of the hammer was the size of the torso of a man and the haft was fully three stride long. The thick metal handle was made from adamant, the dark swirls of shifting color within the metal proof of its purity. The materials alone would have made the hammer worth guarding, but were that all, Halgrave would not have bothered to construct this room.

The metal plinth itself was enchanted, minor inscriptions providing long-lasting durability and hardness. It was necessary to prevent the metal from buckling under the immense weight of the hammerhead. The crystal that it was made from was dense, heavy beyond belief. Perhaps the stone of the floor could have withstood the pressure unaided, but without the plinth, he

would have had to be exceedingly careful whenever he set it down so as to not shatter the floor. He was not patient enough for that. This was not a showpiece to be arranged carefully for display. This was a weapon, and this room had been designed with practicality in mind.

### ***Center of Mass.***

Halgrave reached out and grasped the handle with one hand, lifting it easily and holding it extended at arm's length. He checked the enchantment as he swept the hammer in a circle, the head barely clearing the walls. There was plenty of charge, the runecraft of the renowned smith Karamaugin holding strong after all these years. An uninformed observer of this feat would have been awed by the strength required. Even had the head been made of mere stone, the strength required to hold the head up by the handle at such a distance was simply inhuman.

A more informed observer would have quickly realized that there was more at play than mere strength. There was a common problem that even the densest warrior came to realize as their strength grew. As monsters grew powerful, more powerful weapons were required to fight them. The easy way was to simply make the weapons bigger. A sword became a greatsword. A hammer became a maul. At some point, the warrior would realize that he was no longer swinging his weapon, the weapon was swinging him. Going further served no purpose.

Halgrave was holding it by the very bottom of the handle. The shaft made a line parallel with the floor, perfectly straight. If not for the enchantments carved into the hammer by Karamaugin, even the adamant shaft would have bent from the weight. To anyone who was aware of the incredible density of Ixyn Crystal, the scene itself was impossible. Had anyone other than Halgrave tried this, they would have found themselves parallel to the floor instead of the hammer, the heavy head firmly planted on the ground. This was perfectly natural, as the dark crystal weighed many times more than both him and his armor combined.



He swung the head up, simply by tilting his wrist. The shaft fell to rest against his neck as he turned to walk from the room, the head of the hammer hovering behind his head as he carried it over his shoulder. It was casual. Easy. This was the benefit of a tier-4 skill. For him, the hammer was as light as a feather, its mass distributed evenly across his entire body. However, anyone struck by the head would have to contend with the full, concentrated weight of the supremely dense crystal, accelerated to ridiculous speeds by his strength.

**Airwalk.** He remembered to activate the skill just in time as he stepped down from the metal plinth. Instead of touching the ground, his foot stopped a few fingers above it, yet still supporting the full weight of his body as well as the hammer. It was fortunate that he had remembered this time. Without the skill, his armored boots would have shattered the stone the moment he stepped down.

He gestured to his servant as he exited the room. "I am going to the center of the city to wait for them to make their next move. Bring me word if—"

[Attention, residents of Fel Sadanis,] a voice echoed. It came from everywhere, and yet nowhere. [By the majority accord of the Citizens of the Democratic Kingdoms of Ekrustia, this area is hereby claimed as...]

Halgrave snorted. "So it is them, then. Damn. At least it's not the Empire. Helmet."

The servant offered it to him. He grabbed it with a hand and slipped it onto his head. He activated another tier-4, Living Armor. His stamina oozed out of his skin to permeate the metal of his blue plate. The thick slabs of metal, already massive, grew even larger and melded together, entombing him within. As the metal grew, it changed, becoming a part of him, a natural extension of his defense as a shell was to a tortoise. The golden symbol of the

Adventurer's Guild on his chest shone in burnished gold, contrasting the deep blue of his metal body. He stood transformed, looking more like a statue than a man. He activated several more skills in quick succession. This was only the beginning. It would take time for the transformation to complete, bringing him up to full strength. From the outside, he already looked like the metal golem he would become. He still held the hammer, the massive thing now looking slightly more reasonable in his metal hands.

Halgrave listened to the mage prattle on in his ear with growing concern as he made his way outside. The hallways and the ceilings had been constructed specifically with his current form in mind. Even at over four stride in height, he had plenty of room. He located the mage the moment he stepped out of the building, spotting a pair of figures floating in the sky, high over the city. He sighed and looked down at his servant. The features of his face were slowly growing out of the plate of armor that had covered his head. The mouth barely moved, the transformation incomplete. Nevertheless, his voice came through loud and clear. "You might want to cover your ears."

The servant nodded and scuttled back inside the building. Halgrave looked back up at the sky. *Mages have it too easy.* He stepped forward. His foot froze in the air as if he'd struck an invisible step. He started climbing, using Airwalk to form a staircase in front of him as he made his way up above the walls of his estate. Once he deemed that he was high enough to avoid any collateral damage, he stopped and stared at the mage, judging the distance. He fell into a crouch, then sucked a breath deep into his metal lungs.

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Velika paced impatiently. There was nothing to do while she waited. She'd already secured the platform and the teleportation complex was deserted. There weren't even any Watch officers

to play with. She idly poked a finger at the frozen officer in front of her. He felt as hard and as smooth as glass to her probing finger. She couldn't move him at all.

The ground shook as Westbridge made his move. *Good, at least he didn't take too long.* Cries of surprise and terror washed over her from the city, but she was distracted by the message that appeared before her. Westbridge had told her that this would happen, but seeing the magnitude of the effect was still shocking. *Every mage in the city just got fucked. I wonder if that includes Westbridge?*

She dismissed the message and returned to her pacing. It wouldn't be long now. True to her expectations, Westbridge quickly appeared. "Come, it is time." He offered her his hand, hovering a few feet above her.

She reached out to take it, feeling weightlessness overtake her as he pulled her into the air. She hated the feeling of magical flight, preferring to keep her feet on the ground. She wouldn't admit it to anyone, but she'd been afraid of heights as a child. That fear was long gone, but the feeling of weightlessness was still disconcerting. Honestly, she preferred teleportation.

[When I let you go, you will need to support yourself. I must conserve my mana now that the barrier has been activated.]

Westbridge spoke in her mind, his voice buzzing annoyingly. The rushing wind would have made it difficult for her to hear him, otherwise. It was more annoying still as she had no way to respond. *Bloody mages.*

They stopped to hover above the city. Westbridge released her and she used Airwalk to catch herself, standing on a platform of solidified air, held there by her will. The Stamina cost was trivial, but it required concentration to keep herself from falling.

Westbridge turned to her, frowning. "Try to look a bit more dignified. This is your elevation, after all."

Velika growled at him as she struggled to stay steady. "Just because it's called an 'elevation', it doesn't mean we have to do it in the fucking sky." Slowly, she managed to steady herself. Airwalk was not meant to be used like this. In her mind, it was for quick steps and redirections, not hovering.

Westbridge had already moved on. She felt him re-establish the connection to her mind, but it was clear that he was doing more than that. One by one, glass spheres popped into existence around him, each about the size of a fist. They looked real, solid, not like the manifestations of mana that they were. Within each sphere hovered a face. She recognized many of them, but a few were unfamiliar. These were the Citizens of the DKE, the glass orbs the physical manifestation of the connection that they all shared through their implants. Westbridge had summoned the full assembly. There were thirty-six faces all staring at her from within the orbs, with Westbridge's annoying superior stare making thirty-seven.

His voice echoed in her mind.

[Attention, residents of Fel Sadanis. By the majority accord of the Citizens of the Democratic Kingdoms of Ekrustia, this area is hereby claimed as a protected territory for summary annexation. I am Citizen Westbridge, and I will be overseeing the transition of control from the Vigilant Order of Watch Keepers to a Citizen of the DKE. Rest assured that we will make this transition as painless as possible. This action has been taken as a preventative measure in the

conflict between the DKE and the Adamant Empire. We do not intend to harm any members of any other organization through this action. On behalf of the DKE, I hereby offer a formal apology to the Watch for the attack upon their outpost. We regret that the necessity of secrecy did not allow us to negotiate for the peaceful transfer of the contested territory.]

He cleared his throat, the feeling coming through the mental link. Velika blinked. *Why did he transmit that?*

[As many of you are no doubt already aware, a barrier has been raised surrounding the city. The barrier cannot be breached and it will sustain itself using the mana of all those within its boundary as an energy source. Do not be alarmed. This measure has been taken to prevent incursion by the Empire via the Fel Sadanis teleportation platform. No entry or exit from the city will be allowed by any means until the conflict is resolved. We apologize for the inconvenience. Should the conflict extend longer than anticipated, the DKE promises to provide the city with whatever resources it requires.]

A collective roar of outrage was rising up from the city, but Westbridge ignored it. Velika smiled at the clamor of the peasants. *Sucks to be you.*

[On a more positive note, I have been given the great honor of officiating the elevation of a new Citizen of the DKE. To oversee the city, I hereby nominate Lady Velika Vekuavak for elevation to the office of Citizen Fel Sadanis, pending confirmat—]

**“OI! WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?!”**

Shutters rattled from the force of the shout that rose from the ground. It was quickly followed by a shining blue form, speeding toward them from the city. It was heading straight toward

them. Velika took a step back in alarm, almost falling as she remembered her precarious footing. She swayed, fighting to regain balance. *Damn it, I need to practice this more.*

If Westbridge was annoyed at being interrupted, his face didn't show it. He watched calmly as the massive metal golem arced past them and began to fall. The golem, no, the man with a golem's form landed softly as if there was solid ground beneath them. He stalked forward, looming over the pair, a massive hammer held over his shoulder. Velika cursed as she recognized him by the description Westbridge had given her. This had to be the Guild branch-leader, Halgrave. It wasn't that she felt threatened by his appearance, what was bothering her was something else entirely. *Damn it, he makes Airwalk look easy. I need more practice.*

[Halgrave. Do not interfere. This matter is between the DKE and the Watch. The Guild has no basis upon which to intervene.]

"The fuck we don't!" Halgrave yelled loudly, though at a more human level. "You attacked the fucking city and you expect me to just sit around?"

[We did not attack the city. We are merely—]

"What the fuck is that, then?" Halgrave shouted, pointing at the massive crater. "That's the middle of a residential district. Do you have any idea how many people you just killed? Do you even care?"

[Casualties of war. Regrettable. No Guild members were harmed. I made sure of that. You have no cause for grievance.]

"I disagree," said Halgrave. "You will lower the barrier and leave this city or else."

[Or else what?] Westbridge sent, tilting his head. [The Guild has no legal recourse in this matter. If you attempt to stop us, it will be as an individual. Your superiors will not support you. I will be free to do with you as I see fit as a matter of self-defense.]

"Horseshit," Halgrave said, gritting his metal teeth. "We've got plenty of recourse. Fine, we don't care what you do with the city. You will let all of the members of the Guild leave through the barrier. We aren't staying trapped in this prison of yours. Anyone else who wants to leave, you let leave too."

Westbridge shook his head. [I am afraid that there can be no exceptions. We cannot allow word of this to reach the Empire. Who knows how many spies they have in the city?]

"That's a fucking crock and you know it!" shouted Halgrave, his volume rising once more. "This is a land grab. You aren't fooling anyone. Drop the barrier. Now."

[I will not.]

Halgrave narrowed his metal eyes. "You will not? Are you speaking as Citizen Westbridge, or as the DKE?"

[Both.]

"Prove it."

Westbridge sighed. Velika grinned at his expression. It was satisfying to see someone stand up to the powerful Citizen like this. Westbridge was a bit of a pompous windbag. She was looking forward to watching the fight between him and the goldplate. That rank meant the Guild branch-leader was over level 50, which was not-coincidentally the line for DKE Citizens as well.

It was a line she had technically not crossed yet. A full group of 7 Citizens had taken her hunting in the depths to find the required essence beast to raise her cap. None of them had been as strong as Citizen Westbridge, but still. It had been a humbling experience. She would be on their level soon. She just needed to grind out the required experience. *Then I'll really show that bitch Lavarro what's what.*

[Very well.] Westbridge turned to face the assembled glass orbs. [Citizen Westbridge formally requests a vote of the full assembly. The motion presented is as follows: The Adventurer's Guild has requested that the barrier be lowered to allow their members to exit the city of Fel Sadanis. Will the DKE consent to this request? A yes vote constitutes agreement to lowering the barrier for a period of precisely one hour to allow the city to be evacuated. A no vote denies this request.]

One by one, the glass orbs lit up as the Citizens cast their votes through their implants. The result was easy to see for all. Over three-quarters of the orbs were red. Westbridge turned back to look at Halgrave.

[Request denied. You will stand down.]

"No," Halgrave said. "I will not." He lowered his hammer, holding it at the ready. "Do not even think of holding the city hostage. If you do anything of the sort, the Guild and the Watch will retaliate. Hells, they probably will anyway. This is between you and me."

[You are wrong there, but very well. I will fight you on your terms. This is your last chance to back down. You have no hope of defeating me.]

Halgrave roared and raised his hammer.



Velika grinned. *This is gonna be good.*