

137: Geometry

"Sleep," Ameliah commanded. When Rain nodded, she narrowed her eyes, then pulled the door shut, sealing it firmly behind her.

Rain sighed, letting his head fall back to the pillow. It was surprisingly comfortable, as was the mattress. Both were stuffed with down and quite expensive by commoner standards, but not so much for adventurers. The sheer luxury of it felt bizarre after so long getting by with just a bedroll, but that didn't stop him from snuggling beneath the blankets.

The soft bed was simply a sign that things were about to change. The camp would become *more*. It would be a fortress, with the only significant issue being the lack of water in the hills. Even that could be mitigated.

Perhaps a pipeline, or a really deep well, or—

Rain shook his head against the pillow.

I'm doing it again.

He closed his eyes, blocking out the ever-present light.

Furniture is an issue. It creates the possibility of shadows. Taking the bed as an example, it doesn't have legs, so nothing can spawn under it, but it can still cast a shadow. That was why I wanted two light sources in here, not just one. Also, I need to find a better backup than that oil lamp. I wonder why evertorch juice doesn't work in—

Rain shook his head again. *Stop.*

This sequence repeated several times until Rain managed to get a leash on his racing thoughts. It was difficult, and not just because he'd been abusing Focus. He had a lot on his mind. Gradually, he packed his worries away—inspecting each one, comprehending it, and then filing it for later. There was nothing he needed to do right now except sleep. Ameliah was right. He couldn't do it all in one day. Trying was idiotic. Inefficient. Disorderly.

Rain's thoughts grew hazy as he sunk further into the mattress.

Dis...order. Disorder...

Rain woke with a groan, opening his eyes to see a dark, cloudy sky through the glass ceiling. His body felt sluggish, and his mind like it had been stuffed with wool.

So basically, back to normal.

Like an old man, he worked himself up into a sitting position, realizing as he did that he was still wearing the same clothes he'd had on when he'd given his speech. He flicked on his HUD, checking the time. That had been eleven hours ago. It was the middle of the night.

A quick blast of Purify took care of his full bladder, which was fortunate, as seconds later there was an unexpected noise that made him jump horribly.

Rain poked his head over the side of the bed, searching for whatever terrifying monster was waiting there to murder him, then relaxed as he saw Ameliah. She'd replaced his bedroll with her own and was snuggled into the crack where the mattress met the floor with her eyes closed. Her hair was draped over her face in a tangled mess, and as Rain watched, she scrunched up her nose, then puffed a few strands of it out of her mouth. After a moment, she sighed deeply, her breathing becoming deep and even once more.

Rain smiled. *Beautiful, kind, strong, and now adorable too? She is so far out of my league it's ridiculous. What does she see in me?*

Carefully, he lowered himself back down to his pillow, using Detection to check the camp's status. Everything seemed to be in order, but he knew that he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep after resting for as long as he had. That meant he had to find something to occupy him until morning, as he didn't dare to try and slip free of the room for fear of waking Ameliah. She needed her rest just as much as he did.

Fortunately, there were plenty of things he could work on right here. He raised his hands, summoning a terminal and keyboard as he did, then typed in a pair of commands.

```
> setmarker softbed  
> ptrack vestvall softbed  
error: ref  
>
```

Ah. Error: ref, is it?

Rain sighed.

Damn it, me. You couldn't have made the name more descriptive?

He sighed again.

Well, it wasn't marker_not_found, so that means... Right. It's probably because I'm missing the armor. Let's see here...

Rain's fingers wiggled for a few minutes.

Progression Tracker [0.5.2]

marker_1: vestvall [28th Winternight]

marker_2: softbed [2nd Fallow]

span: 5.62 days

Tolerances

Focus: 114 -> 146 (+32)

Clarity: 163 -> 171 (+8)

Attribute Buff: 171 -> 177 (+6)

Synchronization

Endurance: 37% -> 40% (+3%)

Equipment

[Removed] Dark Revenant's Armor: -50 Dark Resistance

[Removed] Ascension Cold Tin Ring: -20 Cold Resistance

There we go.

Rain steepled his hands against his chest as he looked over the results shown in the dialog.

Hmm. So the lesson here is: limit break is great for breaking limits. Thirty-two points of Focus tolerance in less than six days? Hot damn.

...

Should I abuse this? Probably not. There could be long-term effects that I don't know about.

...

Am I gonna abuse it anyway?

...

I really shouldn't...

Rain snorted softly, laughing at himself.

I'll talk to Ameliah about it. She has more experience with this kind of thing. Her opinion is more reliable than mine. Anyway, for now, I'll take it easy. Let's see what else there is here...

Endurance sync got a pretty good boost. All it took was getting completely dumpstered. No recovery sync, though, so that's confirmation that external healing doesn't count. No other syncs either...

Rain sighed.

I've been slacking. I need to start running in the mornings again, but there's just so much to do... That's it, I'm making myself a schedule. Exercise is good for mental health, so I'll make the time. I can NOT let myself fall apart.

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

*I'm going to miss you, Dozer. **Character.***

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
22,749	22,750	1,614,832

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
HP	2,000	2,000	400/d
SP	409	600	500/d
MP	5,100	5,100	2.8/s

Attributes

130/177	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	BUFF	SYN
STR	19	50	10	40/40	38%
RCV	19.6	40	10	30/30	49%
END	12	30	10	20/20	40%
VGR	28.5	50	10	40/40	57%
FCS	10	10	10	0/146	100%
CLR	200	200	200	0/171	100%

Resistances

120/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	23.0	0%
COLD	3.0	0%
LIGHT	3.0	0%
DARK	3.0	0%
FORCE	3.0	0%
ARCANE	3.0	0%
CHEMICAL	103.0	0%
MENTAL	3.0	0%

Rain let his eyes rove over the screen, finding everything more or less as he expected. No error had occurred due to his missing armor. He'd fixed that particular bug in his character display weeks ago.

He clicked his tongue.

I'm going to have to tear this whole thing apart again to make it deal with accolades properly, aren't I? I still don't know where to add in the boosts... Do they go to the base attribute, or to the total? The effective? Bah, another problem for later. I need to bind them first...

Rain sighed. He could feel the Heat resistance accolade against his chest, the metal smooth on his skin beneath his shirt. He had wrapped some string around it to make a little harness, then tied it to the same leather cord that held the Malleable Ring.

One thousand resistance is a lot... I still don't know if accolades cause soulstrain, and I'm starting to reconsider starting with this one. Maybe I should try a smaller one first.

Closing his eyes, he let his head sink deeper into the pillow.

No, it wouldn't work like that. Tallheart would have warned me if it did. I can't imagine someone clearing a lair and then having the system melt their brain by jamming an accolade down their throat. Slots are probably the only limitation...

...he said, before reenacting that scene from Scanners.

Rain sighed. *I don't even know if I'll be able to get into my soul at all right now. I should probably just start there.*

Carefully, he pulled the leather cord out through the collar of his shirt, concentrating on maintaining his link to the Malleable Ring. Once the accolade was free, he let it and the ring fall to his chest atop his shirt. As long as the plate wasn't touching his skin, he wouldn't end up bonding it accidentally. To hide it from view, he pulled up the covers, figuring that it would

be safe enough. Even if he somehow dislodged the blanket and exposed the plate to greedy eyes, nobody was going to get past Ameliah, asleep or not.

Tallheart might be able to manage it. Rain smiled. Dollars to donuts, the Soften Steps accolade is how he's been sneaking up on people. I'm onto you, bub. Trying to give me one of your accolades without me realizing it. You're not nearly as sneaky as you think you are.

...

Damn it, I just lost the game.

Rain let his amusement linger for a few moments, then gently pushed it away. More thoughts followed, and Rain shifted his perspective, visualizing them as waves on an ocean wracked by storm. The surface roiled, but the water below was calm—tranquil and undisturbed. That was where he placed himself, floating below the chaos and observing it from below. With each inhale, the surface calmed. With each exhale, he sunk lower, leaving his worldly cares behind.

All of his fears, all of his worries, all of his pain; it would all remain on the surface.

At the bottom, there was nothing but tranquility.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

A flicker of pride in how much better he'd gotten at this threatened to shatter his focus, but it, too, was merely a wave upon the surface. Just another ripple. It could not disturb him, not down here.

In...

...and out.

In...

...and out.

...

...

...

Chaos.

Immediately, Rain was hurled back into his body, and he gasped as his head leapt from the pillow.

Damn!

He forced himself to relax, listening carefully to Ameliah's breathing. Thankfully, it didn't seem like his outburst had woken her, and after taking a few calming breaths, he sighed. *That was worse than usual. I was afraid of this. I'm not giving up, though.*

Closing his eyes again, he returned his thoughts to the ocean. It took four more attempts, but finally, he managed to break through without succumbing to the insanity. It was only after

he'd built the Zero Bastion that he could spare another thought for just how difficult it had been this time. While his soul was always turbulent, the intensity of the chaos varied with his mental state and his mood. Given recent events, even getting this far was an accomplishment.

A spark of pride filled Rain, and the Bastion trembled. The chaos threatened to tear it apart, but Rain resisted, concentrating on a single concept, the same one that had created the Bastion in the first place.

Binary Divide.

Rain clung to that fundamental duality with all of his might. Zero was nothingness. Void. One was everything. Matter. Energy. Light. Feeling. Emotion. One was not chaos. One was what held the chaos at bay. It was a barrier, constructed of the ordered matter of his self. Of his *essence*.

The trembling stopped.

Rain didn't loosen his grip. Instead, he tightened it further. In the past, he'd tried expanding his image of the Bastion to include more than just the simple duality of zero and one. He'd failed. The thing the Bastion needed wasn't a more detailed image. What it needed was simple repetition.

Manipulating the wall of the Bastion, he began to change its shape. From one side, the chaos bulged inward, forming a teardrop intrusion. Larger and larger it grew, inflating like a balloon until it could grow no more, the outer walls shrinking to accommodate it. Rain squeezed, necking it down and then pinching it off completely, leaving a pearl of chaos encapsulated within the bubble of void.

Pearl.

Bastion.

Soul.

A sphere within a sphere within a sphere.

The Bastion trembled, as did the pearl, both essence-barriers beginning to destabilize from the strain. Before either could collapse, Rain shifted his perspective once more, wrapping his consciousness around the pearl.

BINARY DIVIDE!

The tiny bubble split, bursting into space and substance.

The Bastion's perimeter exploded outward, driven by the pressure of the newly liberated void. It swelled against the chaos like a depth charge pushing back the sea. The outer membrane stretched to its limit, trying to contain it, then beyond. Ragged tears formed, and the expansion halted, then reversed. Before the walls could crash back down to nothingness and drown Rain in chaos, he seized the leftover essence from the second division and hurled it at the walls. With his will, he forced it to merge with them, mending the tears.

The shrinking stopped.

Everything was still once more.

The Bastion *held*. It was larger now—stronger than it had been before. Volume grew as radius cubed, while surface area grew as radius squared. With two units of essence and two units of void, the mathematics were clear. The Bastion would not fall.

If Rain had had a mouth, he would have smiled. *Nailed it! That was easier than I th—*

With only the smallest warning, the bubble trembled, then popped.

Rain let out a tired sigh as he found himself in his body once more. Apparently, things hadn't been quite as stable as he'd thought. If he wanted to think in full sentences inside the Bastion, he clearly had a bit more work to do. Despite the failure, however, this was progress. He'd gotten there once, and the theory was proven. It *had* been stronger after two repetitions, there was no doubt about that, and if it was stronger after two, then, well...

Time to grind.

Four hundred ninety-five.

...

Four hundred ninety-six.

...

Four hundred ninety-seven.

...

Four hundred ninety-eight.

...

Four hundred ninety-nine.

...

Five hundred.

...

Five hundred and— You know what? No. I'm taking a break.

Rain let his consciousness drift away from the wall, moving toward the center and leaving a swirling trail through the whitish-blue mist.

Things had changed.

The Bastion was still a sphere, but where before it had been a sphere in *concept*, now it was a sphere in a much more physical sense.

Geometry was a thing now.

It hadn't been before, even though Rain had been pretending that it was. In building the Bastion, he was *defining his own reality*, as insane as that sounded. When his awareness had been subsumed in the chaos, his soul had no dimensionality whatsoever. No center. No edge. No up or down or inside or any of that real-world nonsense. Rain's mind, however, knew those concepts and brought them along for the ride when he'd begun purifying—for lack of a better word—his essence. He was writing the rules for how his soulscape worked, and the image he'd chosen included geometry. Therefore, it had it.

Had Rain's consciousness had temples, he would have rubbed at them, massaging away a headache that couldn't exist without a head. Instead, he settled for a sort-of side-to-side wobble, making the pale mist swirl and dance.

All of this is confusing as hell. At least things are stable enough now that I can actually think down here. I just wish I had someone to explain any of this to me. Aren't I supposed to have found myself a Dumbledore by this point? What kind of fantasy adventure is this, anyway? I demand a refund.

Rain wobbled again. *Bah*. He gently nudged his thoughts in a more productive direction, reviewing what he'd learned so far.

Things had been straightforward at first. He'd reformed the Bastion without issue and then repeated his trick, bringing himself up to two essence. Another conversion got him to three, and then another to four. At that point, he'd tried purifying two essence at once and had failed horribly. Undeterred, he'd started again, this time trying to skip three and go straight to four, intent on doubling each time. That had failed even harder, and after a few more fruitless attempts, he'd given it up and resigned himself to adding only one essence at a time.

That had gone swimmingly for a while, with each conversion being easier than the last, but then, things had started to get...*weird*.

As he'd neared one hundred units of essence, the concepts of light, darkness, and color had begun seeping into his reality. Rain didn't have eyes, but that didn't seem to matter. Somehow, he could see anyway. Essence was matte white, while the chaos was a violent puke-orange kind of color. Void was black, smoky, and yet somehow transparent. It was odd.

His point of view—mind, consciousness, core, whatever—had become more defined. Before the appearance of color, he'd been able to perceive everything in the Bastion in a blurry omniscient sort-of way. Now, his vision was locked to a single point and direction, bringing him the ability to see detail but narrowing his focus. The gradual transition between the two had been disconcerting, to say the least.

His core was now acting like a physical *thing*. It had inertia, everyone's favorite property of matter, and it glowed vibrantly, the color changing to reflect his thoughts. The glowing was a good thing, as he saw it. Light couldn't exist without the concept of darkness, and it sure was dark in here.

All of that was strange, sure, but not really a problem. He was still able to manipulate the essence-matter with his perspective locked; the way that he did it had merely changed. Now it was more like...reaching out with invisible hands. He'd pull a bubble of chaos in through the wall, then squeeze it like a lemon until the void dripped free and he was left with a glob of essence.

The problem had come in when the void itself began to change its nature. At first, it had exerted pressure, inflating the bubble he'd built like a balloon. At around two hundred units, however, that had started to change. It had begun acting more like, well, nothing. To his perception, it had lost the feeling of having color, becoming transparent in truth. It had quickly worsened to the point that Rain had feared the Bastion would crumple like a submarine at the bottom of the Marianas Trench. To prevent that, he'd shrunk it down, thickening the walls.

Unfortunately, that hadn't worked so well.

The Bastion's stability seemed to correlate not only to the strength of the outer wall but also to the volume it enclosed. The smaller it was, the more it shuddered in response to his thoughts. When he made it bigger, the outer wall became too weak to stand up to the turbulent chaos. It began bending and rattling like aluminum siding in a hurricane. Not good.

To get around the issue, he'd shrunk the Bastion down as much as he dared, then spent a few hours trying to think as little as possible while he played with essence matter. Getting it to hold a shape had been the real difficulty. Once he'd finally managed to make beams that didn't melt when he looked away, he'd spent another few hours welding a bunch of them together into a geodesic dome inside the Bastion's outer skin.

This idea wasn't anything new to him. In tenth-grade geometry, he'd given a presentation titled: *Applications of the Tensegrity Vacuum Bottle in Fantasy Airship Design*. He'd gotten an A.

He'd also gotten made fun of by the popular kids, but that was neither here nor there.

What mattered was that the pattern of triangles allowed you to build a stronger sphere using less material. It meant he could keep expanding the Bastion, pushing through the inflection point created by the loss of void pressure until the square-cube law took over once more. It was a shame that the added complexity made expanding the structure a giant pain in the ass.

Fortunately, Rain wasn't working with that many polygons yet. While it was true that his sphere did look a bit like PS1 Hagrid, the structure was *working*. It was even strong enough now that he didn't need to use each piece of converted essence immediately. At present, there were several dozen globules of it floating haphazardly in the mist, waiting their turn to be added to the triangular webbing.

Rain bobbed up and down uncertainly as he considered them. *Should I add some cross-bracing? I wanted to get to a thousand units, but this might be enough. I just need this damn thing to hold together when I leave so I can come back and work on it again...*

Exerting his will on one of the beams, Rain watched as the whole structure flexed alarmingly, conveying an ominous creaking noise despite his lack of ears.

Damn it.

He relaxed, removing the pressure.

I don't think it's there yet. I just wish I had some frame of reference. Is five hundred units a lot? How much chaos is out there, exactly? For all I know, I could stay in here for ten thousand years and not even unblock my first wood meridian.

Pink light flickered as Rain laughed at his own joke.

His thoughts were strange in here. Without his pesky physical body and all those icky hormones, his emotions flowed freely. He couldn't really have a mood. Instead, he could shift from happy to sad to angry in an instant, depending only on what he was thinking about.

There was an advantage to existing as a being of pure thought. He could be sad, yes, but depressed? Not really. He didn't have a brain, and thus it couldn't wallow in a vat of misery juice for hours on end. Time would tell if that would remain true as he converted more and more essence.

Rain wiggle-shrugged.

Speaking of hours on end, it's been...some number of them.

Damn, it would be nice if this place ran on soultime, but I tested that weeks ago. No such luck.

HUD!

...

Balls. Still nothing.

Rain's color faded to a fearful blue.

How much longer do I have until someone wakes me up? I've made some fantastic progress... I don't want to lose it all and have to start again, and I must be almost out of time.

He wobbled.

Maybe this is the wrong approach. If I'm going to lose all this anyway, what I should be doing is trying to understand. That way, I can do things faster next time. For example, what the hell is this damn mist supposed to be?

Focusing again on his surroundings, he paused. The mist had definitely gotten thicker since he'd first noticed it. That had been while he'd been trying to figure out how to stick two essence beams together. Its appearance seemed to be a function of time, more so than the quantity of essence he'd converted. At first, he'd thought it had been some of the chaos leaking in, but that wasn't it. The chaos had a flavor, and that flavor could best be described as rage. The mist, on the other hand, tasted like...

Grape? Maybe raspberry?

Pink light flickered again as Rain laughed, spinning in a happy circle. He froze, gawping in golden wonder at the spiraling vortex that this had created. It was easier to see patterns in the smoke now that it was getting thicker.

He summarily promoted it to fog.

It almost seems like... Hang on a damn minute!

Rain stopped moving, then waited. The fog gradually calmed, but not completely. Even after he counted to sixty, it was still moving. Squinting as hard as a formless point of thought could squint, he swept his gaze around in a circle, then up and down. The fog was wafting gently away from him in all directions, despite the fact that he was completely motionless.

It's coming from me! I was right! As I build structure, things start to emerge. My core is generating this stuff!

...

Is this what mana looks like inside the soul? I...don't....hmm.

Hmm.

Hmmmmmmmm.

Okay, so I'm a glowing point of light that thinks and generates mana...

...and I live inside a domain that is really just more of me in a different form...

...

Am...

Am I a lair?

Rain flashed orange with irritation.

No! Never mind that! That's silly. Damn it, even disembodied, I can't stay on topic!

He did a few playful swoops to clear out his thoughts, then returned his focus to the problem at hand.

So this mist, I'll assume it's mana. It follows that there's health-mist and stamina-mist too. All of that would be...where? All blended up with the chaos outside? What about my attributes like Strength and so forth? They're properties of my soul, too, right? Shouldn't they exist in here as... something? Or are those properties of my core? And what the hell is essence anyway? Is it experience? If not, what's the difference? Where are my skills in this? I can still feel the patterns with Mana Manipulation back in my body, but I've never seen anything like that in here. Do skills live in the body and not the soul, or are they here and just too scrambled for me to see them? Are there other things mixed up in the chaos? Accolades, maybe? What about those damn trauma land mines I've been making out of my memories? Where are those?!

Rain blazed with scarlet frustration.

I HAVE SO MANY QUESTIONS!

The Bastion groaned, and one of the beams began to buckle under the pressure. Frantically, Rain pressed his core against it, shoving it back into place and holding it there until the horrible noise stopped. Wafting himself away, he admonished himself for his stupidity.

Ugh! This is confusing, and I hate it! I miss the system. It might not have had an instruction manual either, but I at least had some numbers to look at. All this metaphysical bullshit is driving me insane! As soon as I get blue boxes working in here, I'm building an essence panel or something... Ooh, maybe I can do that from outside.

...

I'm distracted again, aren't I?

Rain let himself sink down to the bottom of the sphere, suddenly sad. His light turned blue, deepening and taking on a purple tinge.

I miss Dozer.

With a thought, he pulled all of the globs of essence with him, pretending like gravity existed, though it didn't as of yet. He spent a few minutes glumping them together into a single blob. This only made his color deepen further, and in a fit of crimson rage, he kicked it away. Moments later, he was back to the sunny yellow of curiosity as he watched its passage through the mist.

So, this maybe-mana stuff. How can I tell that's really what it is? I can't access the system, so I can't activate spells from in here like I could in soulspace. Damn. If I could do that, I could just try using some mana to see if it got used up.

Hmm.

It shouldn't be JUST mana, right? If I'm right and my core is generating this fog, then it should actually be health, stamina, and mana, all mixed together, just much less of the other two. Can I filter it somehow? I could check the ratio to confirm—

What was that?

"Rain." Ameliah sighed, walking over to the side of the bed. Gently, she placed a hand on Rain's shoulder. "Hey. Wake up." When he didn't react, she jostled him slightly. "It's time to get out of bed. Weren't you the one who was complaining about there being too much to do? You're really going to sleep all day?"

Rain's head flopped to the side bonelessly. He still hadn't shown a single sign that he'd heard her, and Ameliah's face froze, concern worming its way into her mind. Urgently, she pressed her head against his chest, listening for—there it was. A heartbeat.

She sighed, closing her eyes. She raised her head, then shifted her weight so she was sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Come on, Rain. I need you to wake—"

Rain spasmed, almost tossing her off the bed as his body bucked beneath the blanket, his spine arching like a bridge over a narrow river. After a moment, he fell back to the bed, then groaned. He lifted a hand to his face, covering his eyes.

"Wow, okay. Didn't miss this."

"Rain?" Ameliah asked, leaning over him, having recovered from the shock. "Are you alright?"

Rain jerked again, opening his eyes. "Woah! Ameliah! You scared me!"

Ameliah snorted. "No, you've got that backward. You scared *me*. What the depths was that just now?"

"I—sorry. I was in my soul." Rain hesitated, then grinned. "Ameliah, it was amazing! I figured out how to split the chaos into void and essence more than once, then I found a way to shape essence, then I made a geodesic sphere, and then there was this mist which I think was mana and...sorry." He chuckled, then grunted, laboriously pushing himself up into a sitting position. "Maybe I should start with 'good morning'."

Ameliah smiled. *This is the most Rain Rain's been in weeks.* "What did you not miss?"

"Huh?"

"It was the first thing you said when you woke up."

"Oh." Rain ran a hand through his hair, activating Purify moments later. "The headache. It was gone down there. I've had it for so long now that I'd almost forgotten what it was like to be without it." He sighed. "It was nice. I was making some real progress."

"I shouldn't have disturbed you then," Ameliah said, biting her lip.

Rain shook his head. "No, it's fine. If anything, you should have woken me up hours ago. I'll work on my soul more later. Wix wasn't built overnight."

Ameliah stood, allowing Rain to free himself from the blanket, then offered him a hand to help him to his feet. It hurt just watching him in the mornings, sometimes. She could barely imagine what he must be going through with his soul as damaged as it was. She looked up at the mid-morning sky for a moment and was caught by surprise as he suddenly wrapped his arms around her. She quickly returned the embrace, closing her eyes. It felt much better than it had yesterday, now that her soulstrain had faded away.

"Thank you," Rain said into the side of her neck.

Ameliah released him, tilting her head as they broke apart. "For what?"

Rain smiled. "For everything. For saving me multiple times. For tolerating my stupid questions. For being my friend... Ameliah, I don't deserve you. I've done nothing for you; all I do is take, take, take. From you, from Tallheart... I'm making both of you do all the work, and I can't even... I want to be able to give you something back, but the only thing I could think of is a book, and it's going to take me too long to—"

"Stop," Ameliah said, cutting him off.

Rain stopped, breathing heavily as he stared at her.

"Do you really believe that?"

"What?"

"That you have nothing to offer," Ameliah said, shaking her head. "You always do that. Talk down about yourself. You might not see it, Rain, but you've given me more than..." She looked away, her throat feeling suddenly tight. She hadn't been prepared for this conversation.

"More than what?" Rain asked, sounding similarly affected.

"You've given me a home, Rain," Ameliah said, meeting his eyes. "Tallheart, too. I'm sure he feels the same way. I have *friends* now. You, Tallheart, Jamus...the others. I haven't had friends since..." She shook her head. "So stop it. Stop saying you haven't given me anything. Now come on. I didn't come in here to share my feelings. There's work to be done."

"I—" Rain began, rubbing at his neck. "No, you're right. This isn't the time for this. I need to go talk to... When did you move the door?"

Ameliah laughed, pulling aside the curtain that led to the room where Rain had stashed his desk. The wooden door that had been in the bedroom was now in here, leading out to the company hall. Additionally, there was another curtained passage on the far wall that led to the room she'd made for Tallheart. Some sheets of paper were scattered across the floor, having been blown off the table by the wind overnight.

"What?!" Rain gasped. He pulled free of her hand and rushed for them, falling to his knees. "How did this happen?!"

Ameliah's brows knit together in confusion. Those papers, she knew, were nothing. It was just the 'ruined' sheets that Rain had left piled on the desk. The important stuff was with Vanna, who was still trying to make sense of the intimidatingly thick stack of rules he'd left her to sort through. Despite this, Rain looked as if he'd been personally attacked. As Ameliah watched, he scabbled across the floor like a rat, collecting the papers as he muttered to himself.

She narrowed her eyes. "Rain?"

"Hmm?" Rain said, not looking at her.

She shook her head. "Have you noticed that you've been acting a bit...odd?"

"Odd how?" Rain asked, standing with an armful of papers. He moved to the table, then placed them down and began straightening them into a neat stack.

Ameliah gestured vaguely. "Odd like hanging blankets on the walls and sending Mlem to buy potted plants because they 'tie the room together'. Odd like asking Tallheart to reforge a fork because one of the tines was slightly longer than the others." She gave him a pointed look. "Odd like having a fit over a pile of trash on the floor."

Rain blinked, looking up. "He told you about the fork?"

Ameliah nodded. "People have been noticing things, Rain. I thought it was just you trying to cope with what happened, but...are you okay?"

"I...no, I'm not okay, but I'm getting there." He hesitated. "What are you trying to say?"

"Hmm," Ameliah said to herself, walking over to the desk. She picked up the topmost page from the newly straightened pile, glanced at it to make sure it wasn't anything actually important, then crumpled it up and tossed it on the floor.

Rain's eyes widened as if he'd just watched her kick a puppy, and he dove after it.

"What did you do that for?!"

"To prove a point," Ameliah said. "It's trash, Rain."

"No, it can be recycled!" He snapped, flattening the paper out on the ground. "Damn, it's all crumpled now..."

"Rain, that level of reaction isn't normal, no matter how expensive that paper is," Ameliah said. "When you were in your soul...was there anything different? Anything that wasn't supposed to be there?"

"I...what?" Rain asked, still fussing over the sheet of paper. With a visible effort, he looked up. "I told you about the mana mist. That's pretty different."

Ameliah shook her head. "Not like that. Something else. Something familiar."

"I...don't think so?" Rain said, getting up. He looked at the stack, perfectly aligned with the desk, then at the crumpled sheet in his hand, then back at her. His eyes widened as he made the connection.

Ameliah nodded. "Revive Bound Monster. Monster Taming, tier two."

Rain sat hard against the side of the desk, letting the page fall to the ground. "That's— I don't have—no, that can't be possible, can it? Maybe... Yes. If the system has a provision for it... then..."

Ameliah nodded. "There's a hole in your paling, right? What if that let Dozer get into your soul somehow, after he died, even though you don't have the skill. Now he's... I don't know. Influencing you somehow. Making you want to clean and sort things."

"The link!" Rain gasped, pushing himself up off the desk. "The link is still there, Ameliah, but it isn't leading anywhere! That's just like when I was trying to find the link between my body and my soul! I can't just follow it because it isn't going to any one spot. It's everywhere! Dozer's not dead, he's...blended up with the rest! I just need to strain him out of the chaos, and then... shit, how can I build him a new body without the skill?"

"One step at a time, Rain," Ameliah said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "And don't..." she shook her head. "You should prepare yourself in case we're wrong. Some things ARE impossible."

Rain shook his head stubbornly. "No! Depths take my eyes and call me a fool! I didn't even realize how I've been acting!" He blindsided her with another hug, squeezing hard enough that she had to exhale sharply. Had she been unawakened, she would've likely had a few broken ribs from the experience. "Thank you, Ameliah! Thank you! I need to—"

There was a knock at the door, which opened before either of them could react. Romer entered, carrying Nibs in his arms. "Rain, Staavo wants to know—" He stopped, blinking. "Oops. I'll, uh...come back later."

Rain laughed, releasing Ameliah and dashing for the bedroom, ignoring Romer completely.

"Um..." Romer said awkwardly, "What just happened? Is he okay?"

"He's fine," Ameliah said, smiling.

He's fine.