

## 174: Guide

The bedroom in which Rain woke wasn't something he'd spent much time working on. When he'd first learned he could sleep in his soul, he'd left himself some #todos about making the room as cozy as possible. They were now so far down in priority that it was laughable. That wasn't to say he'd made no changes to the room, though. He'd had to enlarge it for his new avatars, for one. There were also functional objects present which made the room worth maintaining in the first place, such as the grandfather clock and the PA system controls. If he had added a small, framed picture of Ameliah on his bedside table, so what?

Transition completed, Rain sat up, glanced at the grandfather clock to memorize the time, then looked down. "Damn it," he muttered, getting out of bed and leaving the covers unmade. Stretching, he walked to the full-length mirror that stood against the wall of the golf-ball-like room. Peering into it, he saw his reflection peering back at him. He rarely saw it these days. Mirrors weren't exactly easy to come by in the real world.

He tilted his head, examining his body. Other than the plaid pajama pants and the tight white t-shirt, the avatar was the same as it had been when he'd last been here. That was to say, it matched his body in the outside world to the smallest detail, not that any of those details were small.

Rain flexed, muscles straining against overtaxed fabric.

*Holy shit.*

Relaxing, he smiled. After Big Bone, he'd started experimenting with muscles first, then skin, hair, and all of the other squishy bits that made up a living being. The results had been

horrifying. Elsewhere in the Bastion, there was a locked and darkened closet containing all of his failed attempts.

It was not a happy room.

This avatar, though, was different. It was him. He'd started thinking of it as his 'True Avatar', with capitalization and everything.

As for how it had happened, it had basically been an accident. He'd been working on his latest Cronenberg disaster, trying to stop his abdominal muscles from painfully tearing his organs out of place every time he moved, when suddenly, things had just started...falling into place. He hadn't known it then, but he'd reached a tipping point. Over the next few days, the avatar had become more and more lifelike, seemingly on its own. Now, it was basically indistinguishable from his real body. He could make changes, but they would always revert.

*Case in point, these damn pajamas.*

Noticing something in his expression, he leaned closer to the mirror. He could see what people were saying. His eyes had changed. Grown...deeper, somehow, though they were the same brown as always. It was hard to describe. His face, too, was not as he remembered it. His skin was clear of fast-food-induced acne and had a rich, healthy tan despite how he'd been hiding from the sun in his armor. With muscle having replaced fat, his cheeks were no longer like those of a chipmunk, with solid definition in his cheekbones and jaw. With the neatly-trimmed beard on top of everything, he could see himself on a magazine cover.

Maybe something about fishing. He'd probably be wearing flannel.

*I still can't get used to this.*

He flexed again.

*I look amazing.*

Another flex.

*I FEEL amazing.*

Rain chuckled, shaking his head and returning to a neutral posture. The man he saw in the mirror was more attractive than he had any right to be, but it wasn't unexpected. Not at this point. He'd noticed early on that awakened tended to be attractive—though there were outliers. Part of it was just physical fitness, but there was more to it. There was no Charisma stat, but awakening did...*things*. At first, he hadn't believed the rumors of improved eyesight, straightened teeth, increased height, and so forth, given how they contradicted what he'd learned about healing. Now, after his own transformation and after hearing Ameliah's story, he had no trouble believing. The purported changes were slow, particularly at low levels, so he'd be watching the new awakened carefully in the coming months and years, including himself. Rumors were no substitute for proper, scientific observation.

Concentrating, Rain focused on his clothing, bringing in essence from the surrounding air for more material. Within a handful of breaths, he transformed the pajama pants into a pair of well-used blue jeans and made himself a pair of leather, steel-toe boots. The tight t-shirt, he left alone for the moment.

Unable to help himself, he flexed again, then smiled.

*Gotta say, I make a pretty good sexy construction worker.*

Chuckling, he loosened up the t-shirt before SexyBack x Home Depot could start playing through the PA, which might have happened once or twice before. That was the danger of making something that played whatever got stuck in your subconscious.

He left the mirror, walking across the plush carpet to the small bookshelf beside his desk, complete with rolling office chair. The bookshelf was functional, believe it or not, mostly filled with reference material like math textbooks and *The Art of War*. Now that he could keep Winter running while he was in here, recalling English versions of books was a breeze. Having a physical copy in front of him helped immensely in a way that his system interface couldn't replicate. The half-completed pages were stable, requiring no focus to maintain, thus taking the load off his working memory. That made filling in the gaps significantly easier. He didn't need to write out the words manually either, no more than he'd needed to paint the picture of Ameliah sitting by his bedside, likewise a good thing. Rain was no Picasso, so the portrait would have probably ended up looking like one.

Reaching into the bookshelf, he retrieved a notebook from between two copies of the Hobbit—one in common, one still only partially translated into English. Spreading the notebook open on the desk, he hunched over it to jot down a few things.

*I better not keep ending up in my pajamas because I got portaled while wearing them. If that's the reason, I'll scream. Maybe it's the bed that's doing it?*

He scratched at his ear with his pencil, thinking.

*I bet Tallheart doesn't have these problems. His avatar came fully formed. Not fair. Not fair at all.*

After writing down the words 'not fair' and underlining them, Rain turned the page. Without access to the system, ordering his thoughts meant writing them out in a more physical form. He could have added the words directly with his will, as he'd done with the other books, but that wasn't the point. The physical act helped.

In the partly-filled table on the next page, Rain logged the time he'd noted on the grandfather clock, along with his current stats. Doing some quick math, he added the time acceleration factor in the next column, then the calculated coefficient for the formula that defined it. Noticing that he hadn't actually written out the formula anywhere, he drew himself a little box below the table, then did a sample calculation using today's values.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Time Acceleration} &= 1 + (\text{Effective Clarity}) * (\text{Dynamo [assumed]}) * (\text{Coefficient}) \\ \text{Time Acceleration} &= 1 + (270) * (3) * (197.5 \mu\text{s/s}) \\ \text{Time Acceleration} &= 1.16 \text{ s/s}\end{aligned}$$

As soon as he was done, he set down the pencil, then slapped himself in the forehead. Throwing himself into the office chair and leaving his avatar to spin, he returned to his physical body, finding Ameliah's hand still warmly clasped in his own. He smiled, careful not to move as he accessed the Malleable ring, dumping two hundred points into Clarity and leaving the rest in Strength.

Within a minute—only taking that long due to the effort of maintaining Winter—he was back in his soul, now with a time acceleration factor of 1.28 s/s.

*That's better. You'd think with a memory like mine, I could remember things.*

The acceleration factor wasn't anywhere near what it had been during the obelisk incident. Then, the coefficient had been a redonkulous 0.1 s/s. He didn't know if the artifact had been responsible or if it was just some fundamental difference between soulspace and his inner world.

Regardless, the coefficient was improving, correlating roughly to the radius of his core, and that was exciting enough to optimize. As near as he could work out, the coefficient had been growing at a rate of about 3.3  $\mu\text{s/s}$  per day—of *perceived* time—ever since his turbine upgrades. The acceleration only applied when he was in his soul, so the best way to speed up his growth was to spend as much time inside as possible. In trying to figure out how the growth rate would translate to real-world time, however, he'd lost several hours wrestling with piecewise integration, ending with his brain feeling like it had been replaced with an underbaked soft pretzel. He'd finally been forced to throw up his hands, returning to practical matters.

*Speaking of practical matters, time to stop screwing around.*

Rising from his chair, he tucked the notebook back into the bookshelf, then headed for the door. It whisked open as he stepped onto the pressure plate, and he made his way through the growing network of hamster tubes, heading for the hangar.

Through the glass walls of the tubes, Rain surveyed the Bastion as he walked. The chaos was almost nonexistent in immediate volume, only visible as the faintest haze. Solidified essence created a sort of...order field...around it. Rain pictured the Bastion as a space station, basically, and the order field enforced this image. In the past few weeks, it had grown strong enough to create a bubble of semi-vacuum around the entire structure.

It was thanks to that bubble that he could see the entire station in its asymmetrical, unplanned glory. Some rooms were still scaled for his smaller avatars, inaccessible to him and useless, which was why he hadn't bothered to fix them. He had more urgent alterations to make, like building essence tanks and extending the intake pipe to get at fresh chaos. The latter he could have solved by tweaking his image to collapse the bubble, but there was a good reason to keep the chaos away. As time had gone on, he'd discovered that it had a mildly corrosive effect on the station's structure. Liquid essence was even more vulnerable, essentially boiling on contact.

Using a cross-tube to bypass the central ring, Rain frowned as he neared the hangar. It was a massive structure, easily the largest component of the Bastion, its size exceeding that of the hub itself. His frown was due to the wisps of bluish smoke escaping from the airlock at the end of his chosen access tunnel. That could only mean one thing.

Reaching the airlock, Rain clicked his tongue and willed the portal open. As the mechanism spun, the leak became a torrent, and his outfit was drenched. Much like when he'd first formed the Bastion, the hangar had become so packed with essence that it had begun to condense. Pulling some of the fog into his avatar, Rain wrapped himself in a long overcoat of waterproof leather, flaring slightly past his waist and falling to his ankles. It looked a bit out of place with his previous getup, so he changed his t-shirt to a slate-gray button-down and his pants from blue denim to dark brown linen. Not stopping there, he altered his boots, softening and darkening the leather while adding laces and raising the cuffs to mid-shin.

Sealing the airlock behind himself, Rain floated weightlessly forward through the fog until his fingers found the hull of Big Gulp—his latest airship and the reason for the hangar's ridiculous size. It wasn't much more than an enormous zeppelin-shaped essence tank with some extra

bits here and there. Other than the bridge at the front, the only notable features were the submarine-like control planes along the sides and the four giant engine nacelles bolted at the rear—each with a bladed turbine not unlike the one that fed his core. None of those details were visible now, thanks to the fog.

Working his way upward along the curve of the hull, he found the fill hose at the top. It had decoupled from the ship's fill port and was flailing around, belching gaseous essence. Rain clicked his tongue, sealing the fill port after verifying that the craft was entirely tanked up, then set about catching the hose. Hand over hand, he pulled himself along it until he reached a mechanism protruding from the hangar's ceiling. After a brief inspection, he hit himself in the forehead again. He corrected the tolerance issue that had caused the valve to jam, then manually closed off the flow to the hose. The overpressure valve engaged as designed this time, sending the flow off to the storage tanks.

Nodding, he left his avatar there for a moment and swapped to Big Bone, out at the storage tanks in question. After verifying that the essence was indeed getting there, he checked each tank's relief valve in turn, making sure that none had the same flaw. The last thing he needed was an explosion while he was gone. That was another thing that might have happened before.

When he was as finished as he could be, he left Big Bone and returned to the hangar. Guiding himself along Big Gulp's hull again, he made his way to the front of the craft, then entered through an airlock. His boots thudded into steel deck plating under the influence of artificial gravity, and after a brief walk down the access tunnel and another airlock, he was in the bridge.



It was cramped, the space no larger than the cockpit of one of his Kludge models. In fact, that was exactly what it had been.

Still busy condensing essence from the air, Rain sat in the control chair, then ran his fingers through his wet hair, slicking it back. Flicking the excess moisture away and drying the rest of his clothes—which now included a black-and-gold neckerchief, a waistcoat, and numerous brass buttons shaped like cogs—he turned his attention to the controls, dimly seen on the console by the red emergency lighting. It was all analog dials and mechanical levers in here, though the connections to the engine nacelles and control fins were electric. Radio didn't work in the chaos, so everything was hard-wired.

Opening his hand, Rain let a walnut-sized essence-pearl drop into it, the air now clear. He slipped the essence into a spontaneously-forming breast pocket, then yanked a lever that he'd designed to make a pleasing ratcheting sound. There was a mechanical thunk as it reached its stop, then an electric hum as the bridge was bathed in pure, white light. In front of him, several dozen brass gears started to turn, protruding from the console amongst the various levers, switches, and dials.

The gears were vital. The ship simply could not function without them.

Smiling, Rain retrieved the pair of brass goggles he'd left hooked over the main flight stick, then slipped them on across his brow. His look finally complete, he adjusted his neckerchief, then began going through his pre-flight checks. Once he was ready, he flipped a small Frankenstein switch closed, sending a signal through an umbilical to the hangar doors.

After a brief delay, a tremor ran through the ship, conducted through its moorings. The fog didn't rush out of the essence-stuffed hangar as the doors began to open, held in by an

invisible forcefield, like on Star Trek. Getting that to work had taken some doing. While the doors were still moving, Rain pulled a large floor-mounted lever to the right of his chair. Another series of clunks and thuds sounded as the moorings decoupled and the electrical connection to the Bastion was severed. The needles of several gauges dropped to zero, no longer having any signals to display.

Once he sensed the hangar doors were fully open, Rain used his will to urge the ship through them, his view through the crystal window clearing as the bow emerged into the thin chaos. The gas was far too diffuse near the Bastion for the turbines to function, but that hardly mattered. With so little of it around to cause interference, his will would still serve for the moment, and with only a modicum of extra effort.

As the airship drifted ever faster under his guidance, Rain lowered his goggles over his eyes, then grasped the flight controls. Soon, the window in front of him showed nothing but orange smog, and before long, he reached the edge of the bubble. The entire ship juddered, creaking as it suddenly had to contend with the pressure. Turbulence buffeted the craft violently, and it slowed, but its incredible mass would be more than enough to carry it through on momentum alone.

Watching the dials carefully, Rain clung to the flight stick, waiting for the rear pressure sensor to show nominal. The needle rose abruptly, but Rain gave it a moment before nudging the throttle gently forward. A new vibration came to his ears, the mechanical hum growing as the four turbines came up to speed. Using his myriad avatars as navigation anchors, he spent the next few minutes trimming out his attitude and getting himself pointed at the Tear.

Nodding in satisfaction, Rain gave the dials one last once-over, then slammed the throttle as far forward as it would go.

The result was...less than impressive.

The vibration of the engines grew, yes, but other than that, the ship barely seemed to respond. Rain sighed disappointedly as he settled back into his seat. He watched the air-speed gauge creep upward as the ponderous ship accelerated like a geriatric snail. He'd doubled the size of the engines since his last trip, but he'd made the tank bigger too. Liquid essence had a weight to it, independent of whatever properties it had within his physics simulation. He was moving a *lot* of it. Approximately 4 MESS by his calculations—four *million* essence.

Rain removed the goggles from his head, replacing them on their hook, then prepared himself for the long haul. There was a reason the cabin was so elaborate. He'd had the time.

Reaching into his breast pocket, Rain removed the pearl of essence, quickly shaping it into a large twenty-sided die. He shook it around in his palm, then dumped it out into a cupholder—no airship was complete without cupholders. Peering after it, he saw the number six staring up at him. The ship's PA crackled, and *The Chain* by Fleetwood Mac began playing, as close to a random selection as he could manage.

Rain smiled, thinking back to being a child, riding crammed between his parents in the middle seat of his dad's old, rusted-out pickup, windows down, with both of them singing along.

*Good roll.*

He closed his eyes and took a moment.

Eventually, he had to open them again, making a few adjustments as his speed leveled off, and in doing so, bringing himself right back to the present. As of a few days ago, the last of the cables spanning the Tear had been put in place. It wasn't enough. His attempts to tighten them as planned to pull the Tear closed had failed. His attempts to heal the wound by bathing it in pure essence had failed. Even trimming away the tattered edges was beyond him, the paling-stuff resisting his every effort to cut it. Essence simply couldn't compare to whatever the paling was made of, no matter how much he hardened it, no matter how much he sharpened his will.

Any patch he created would *never* be as good as the real thing, not unless he made some breakthrough in understanding. That wasn't likely to happen any time soon, not without a guide. And so, he would use the tools that he had.

Rain gently nudged Big Gulp back on course. Enormous as the ship was, it was still at the mercy of the ever-shifting chaos, making this only the first adjustment of many. Navigating the currents hardly required his full attention, but it was just annoying enough to keep him here. Thankfully, he had something to do with his time.

Closing his eyes once more, Rain reached through the bulkhead behind his chair, pushing his will into his cargo. In response, it began to change.

It would take time to convert all of it, but he had plenty of that for once. He worked the controls, tilting the planes and fighting against a powerful gust, but he didn't lose focus, not even opening his eyes. Slowly, inexorably, the change spread, shining blue essence becoming dark and syrupy, like tar. It wasn't tar, though, nor any compound Rain could write a chemical formula for.

It was pure stick.

A substance of intention, imbued with his will and shaped by the image he had chosen.

The PA crackled, the song ending, the voices of Buckingham and Nicks fading away. After a brief silence, a much cruder voice burst from the speaker, dredged by Rain's current focus from one of the deepest, darkest crevices of his subconscious.

"NOW THAT'S A LOT OF DAMAGE!"

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Ameliah let herself drift downward, her hair billowing in the murky water as the light faded. At the bottom of the well lay the passage she was seeking. She had yet to reach it.

Each time, just as the darkness became complete, her memories would emerge, oozing through the cracks in the stones that formed the well. Formless, they would brush past her, tormenting her with baseless terror.

Today, there was no room in her for terror. Today, she would break through. Her will was iron, and the only thing in her mind was the image.

Well.

Water.

Darkness.

...Darkness.

She acknowledged it. Acknowledged that the things she'd tossed down here were a part of her, left to lurk unseen at the center of her soul. Her fears. Her pain. Her loss. The harm she'd done.

She *had* to acknowledge it. Had to accept it. Only then could she move on.

"Amy, Amy, Amy..."

Lerith's voice.

Mocking. Taunting. Goaded her for being a fool.

Her resolve trembled, and terror gripped her heart. The iron of her will cracked, beginning to fracture. Back in her body, she tensed, squeezing her hands and finding that one of them wasn't empty.

*No.*

The trembling stopped, iron will turning to steel. She thought of Tallheart, and steel became adamant. Then she thought of Rain, his hand still intertwined with her own. Her will was unbreakable, for she wasn't alone.

Lerith's voice attacked again, and the walls didn't so much as quiver. He began to sing, and she felt her body beginning to twist, horns sprouting from her head and scales crawling over her skin, making it itch and burn. It didn't matter. All that mattered was the image. And Rain's hand, squeezed tightly in her own. The water had become sludge, sliding over her, filthy and thick, but she wasn't afraid. The darkness could not stop her.

And then there was light.

Ameliah gasped, her eyes flying open seemingly of their own accord. She began a curse, then bit it off. She was still seated between Rain and Tallheart, both of them like statues with their eyes closed, but something was wrong.

There was the well. Her well. Sitting there, nestled in front of them, out of place amongst the trees.

Ameliah's eyes widened as the world began to shake, cracks like those she'd seen over Fel Sadanis spreading through the air.

"Shhh..." said a voice. "Calm down. You'll wake yourself, pigeon-head. Deep breaths. Deep breaths."

"Rain?" Ameliah asked, turning to look at him, but he hadn't been the one to speak. His hand, still firmly clasped in her own, was like that of a statue. Cold. Lifeless.

The cracks were spreading faster now, the shaking growing worse.

*That voice... I know that voice.*

Ameliah shook her head and closed her eyes, tuning out all distractions. She breathed deep. In, and then out. It helped a little, but not enough, so in desperation, she reached out and clamped down on the tremors as hard as she could. Slowly, the whirlwind of her thoughts stilled, and the quaking earth ground to a halt.

Tallheart was right. Rain's way wasn't the only way.

She opened her eyes. The cracks were still there, but they'd stopped spreading. The air was still. Likewise, Rain and Tallheart sat motionless, frozen in time. Not even a single leaf moved in the forest around her, and beyond the closest trees, there was only darkness. Not the darkness of night, but the darkness of the void.

She was in her soul.



As if the well hadn't been enough of a clue.

"You're early, Turnip," said the voice, making her turn her head. "I'm impressed, though I really shouldn't be. You're half me, after all."

"Show yourself," Ameliah said, her voice sounding strangely flat. Carefully releasing Rain's frozen hand, she got to her feet, looking around and seeing no one.

The owner of the voice chuckled, and then her father stepped out from behind a tree.

Despite having been primed for something like this, Ameliah's heart skipped a beat, and the cracks surged forward. With a yelp, she squeezed her eyes shut, reasserting control. When she opened them again, her father was still there, just as she remembered him. From his unkempt brown hair, to his patchy beard, to the crumpled, weather-stained half-cloak draped over his shoulders. Even his slouch was the same, as if the weight of the world had been trying to grind him into dust.

"There something in my teeth?" he asked as she stared at him, rubbing at his neck with an awkward grin. "Gods, you're the vision of your mother. Actually, no, you're even taller. You're making me feel like a damn Kin, Amy."

"Don't call me that," Ameliah snapped reflexively, then winced. The earth rumbled out a warning.

*No. Calm down. Focus. It's just a nickname, and he used it long before Lerith ever did. I need to be rational about this. I need answers.*

Looking up, she schooled her expression. "What are you, how are you here, and why?"

Her father blinked, looking hurt. "You don't recognize me?"

"Of course I recognize you," Ameliah said. "I'm more surprised that you recognize me. You died when I was a little girl. It's been more than fifteen years. Now answer the questions."

"See, that's the thing," he replied, ignoring both her tone and the revelation about his death as he walked over to Tallheart. He bent to inspect the smith's antlers. After a moment, he looked up, tilting his head to grin at her. "I'm not rightly sure about any of that stuff." He straightened, then moved over to Rain.

Ameliah blinked and looked down, momentarily distracted by the realization that she wasn't wearing her armor. Instead, she was clad in a close-fitting linen shirt, her shoulders draped by her old, snowy cloak. Her father's knife was at her hip—never mind that she could see the exact same one strapped to his.

She turned her attention back to him fully, watching as he grunted a few times, then huffed in frustration, abandoning his attempt to open Rain's visor. He turned to face her, then blinked, placing a hand over his heart.

"Gods, you're tall! Have I mentioned that?"

Ameliah grimaced, a bead of sweat dripping down her forehead. *What the depths is going on?* She could feel the cracks threatening to break free from her control at any moment. The pressure of holding everything frozen was mounting higher by the moment.

"I'm here to guide you," her father said, unbidden, as he gestured at the trees. "I prepared this so...so you could..." He paused for a long moment, then smiled. "Don't mind me, Turnip. I'm just a bit...what's the word?" He snapped his fingers. "Woolly. That's it. I know I'm here to tell you something, but it's just not coming to me. It's just when you found me in that gutter in Gulan after the night with—" He coughed awkwardly, then fixed her with a sheepish grin. "I suppose I should apologize for that. Actually, I should probably just apologize for everything all at once. Get that out of the way."

"Apology accepted," Ameliah said, raising her hand before he could say anything else. Her heart was twisting in her chest, and she felt tears pricking at her eyes, but she couldn't allow herself to feel. If she did, this entire reality would come crashing down in an instant. *He looks like him. Talks like him. Acts like him. But I need to be sure.* "What was Mom's name?"

Her father arched an eyebrow. "Ahzala. Don't you remember my stories about her? Though I suppose...you were really young." He nodded to himself. "How old are you now, anyway? Twenty? Twenty-five? Shit, are you older than me?!" He raised his hands, counting on his fingers. "Eight, plus fifteen is... No, you said more than fifteen. You can't be... Can you?"

"And how did she die?" Ameliah asked, ignoring him.

He flinched and looked away, suddenly somber. "Bandits hit her village while I was away at the Guild. I came back a day later and found you under the crib, crying your eyes out, nobody alive in the village to hear..." With a visible effort, he took hold of himself and met her gaze. "Look, you don't want to be hearing about that. It's me, same as I've always been. No need to be paranoid." He laughed, and then he was smiling again. "Say, did you get True Jack like I wanted for you? Stupid question, of course you did! Look at you, all grown up." He whistled,

looking her up and down. "I mean, damn, Turnip!" He gestured at Rain and Tallheart.

"Whichever of these strapping lads you've claimed, he's a lucky man—or deer, as the case may be. Heavens know, I've got no right to judge what you get up to. Heh." He paused, his smile fading. "Hey... Hey, uh... Are you crying?"

Ameliah held up her hand, warding him away. It was him, or some version of him, anyway. Funny and ignorant and earnest and infuriating and confident and crude and... She struggled, fighting to balance her emotions while holding her reality together. She couldn't give in. He... whatever he was...however real or unreal he was...he had information she needed.

*Think...*

"Shit," her father said, moving as if to approach, then dropping his arms. "I...uh. Look, Turnip... Amy...Ameliah. I know it won't mean much, but I really tried, you know?"

"Shut up. Just shut up."

"Hey," he said, sounding hurt. "I might be dead, but I have feelings."

"Do you?" she asked sharply as the world trembled, immediately regretting it. The trees were beginning to crack apart and fall into the void. She pressed on. "My mother had a sister. What was her name?"

Her father laughed, his entire demeanor changing in an instant. "Oh, her. She was trouble, let me tell you. Always laying into me. Never thought I was good enough for her sister. Me, can you believe it?"

"Name!" Ameliah demanded, fighting to hold on.

"Alright, alright! Damn it, just give me a second. It was... It was... Huh."

"You don't know it," Ameliah said, panting as she managed to claw back a small measure of stability. She shook her head, meeting his gaze. "You don't know it because *I* don't. You never told me. You're...a memory. My memory."

"Well, shit," he muttered, then spat. "That's more confusing than a noble in a pigpen, but I'll be damned if it doesn't make some kind of sense." He looked up. "Still, it's a leap, Turnip. Getting killed might have just scrambled my brains a touch. Are you *sure*?"

"Oh yes, positive," Ameliah grunted, sarcasm thick in her voice. "Not a doubt in my mind."

Her father chuckled. "There's my little Amy. Such sass." He sighed, rubbing at his chin. "A memory, huh? And here I was hoping I was a ghost." He looked around, then waved his hand through one of the cracks, his arm fuzzing as it passed through, taking a long moment to reform. "That's pretty ghostly. Point for my theory." He swept his arm through the crack again. "Say, are you going to do something about these?"

"I'm trying." Ameliah grit her teeth. "It's getting harder."

"It's because I've been helping Turnip, but I'm starting to fade," he replied, his demeanor changing like the wind. "You're going to be on your own for a little while, I think. I won't be here when you get back."

"What?" Ameliah asked, looking at him sharply. "Why not?"

He shrugged. "No idea *why*. I just know, you know? I already told you what I was supposed to, and you're not ready for more."

"You didn't tell me anything!" Ameliah protested, her eyes flicking to Tallheart as the ground crumbled out from beneath him, sending him tumbling into the void. The moment his frozen body passed over the edge, it shattered, dissolving into dust. She looked back at her father. "What was that you just said? About me not being ready for more?"

"Could have sworn I..." he mumbled, scratching his ear as he looked around in confusion. "Anyhow, doesn't matter since I can just say it again. It's... It's, uh... You just need to... To..." He stomped his foot. "El's divine saggy ballsack!"

Ameliah grimaced as the shaking worsened. Rain tumbled into the growing abyss, shrinking the world to her father's memory, herself, and the well. Her tears had returned, and her mind felt like an overstretched string, but she refused to give in. She would hold on to the last.

"Oh, Turnip," her father said, stepping away from the crumbling edge. Before she realized what he was doing, she found his arms wrapped around her. The light was fading now. He brought his head close, his breath warm in her ear. Alive. "I love you," he whispered. "And... and I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

Ameliah nodded, her voice choked with emotion as she forced out a response through the strain of holding the world together. "I forgive you."

She squeezed gently, returning her father's embrace. He crumbled into dust in her arms.