

80: Trapped

Outside the barrier lay a sea of white. The snow had fallen heavily, the storm only breaking late into the night and leaving almost half a meter of powder covering the ground. It was almost unheard of for Fel Sadanis to get such a storm, though the city itself hadn't gotten a single flake thanks to the barrier. At the edge of the forest, there was sudden shifting as a suspicious mound of snow collapsed. A woman stood from where she'd been buried and started brushing herself off.

Ameliah was wearing a thick white cloak that she'd purchased from a merchant in the Watch's camp. It was luxuriant and warm, with a bleached Lago fur lining, but that wasn't why she had purchased it. As bitterly cold as it was, she had the resistances to shrug off the ill weather. No, she had purchased it mainly for the color. Her father had always said that it was important to blend into your surroundings when out in the wilds, and she'd taken the lesson to heart. The drab clothing she had been wearing was fine for autumn, but hardly appropriate for winter.

Nevertheless, she was glad of the cloak as she shook off the snow. Just because she wasn't damaged by the cold, it didn't mean she didn't feel it. She wrapped the cloak tightly around herself and looked around. The deep snow was thankfully not that wet, but it was still going to be difficult to move through. It looked like the Watch had employed a few fire mages to keep the main area of their camp clear overnight, but the cleared area didn't extend to where she was standing. She had elected to sleep on her own at the edge of the forest, rather than amid the Watch.

She'd headed out to Tallheart's camp yesterday, finding it deserted. There was the hint of a trail leading off to the east, but she'd reluctantly been forced to admit that she was in no condition to follow it. She had been dead tired from her run and her body had demanded

rest. She'd returned to the Watch camp to purchase the cloak and then retreated to the shelter of the trees, quickly falling asleep despite the growing blizzard.

She checked the time and frowned. She'd slept longer than she'd wanted to. She must have unconsciously suppressed the system's urging for her to wake with the rest of the camp. She sighed and started making her way to the cookfires, plowing through the snow. More tents had appeared overnight, probably freshly made from materials acquired in the surrounding area. The Watch was clearly digging in for a long stay.

The officers patrolling the perimeter did not comment on her arrival. She followed the scent of roasting meat and found a man ladling out a thick stew from a cauldron set up over a fire. The Watch had arranged for some of the local farmers to join them and see to the needs of the camp. It was mid-morning, so there was no line as most people had already eaten. As for the stew, the best thing that it had going for it was that it was warm. The taste was severely lacking, but she didn't complain. Another thing her father had taught her was to never complain about free food. The Bank would have tried to make a profit off the situation, but the Watch didn't care if a stray adventurer or two walked off with a bowl of soup. They had bigger issues to deal with.

She turned her attention to the city. The river was still flowing, though a crust of ice had formed over the surface. The Watch had dug a channel around the barrier on the far side, re-directing the flow of the river so they could get right up to the barrier without wading through freezing water. The near side was a plain expanse of undisturbed snow over what was probably a frozen sheet of ice. She made her way in that direction, intending on inspecting the magical wall for herself.

She reached the barrier and lay a hand against the smooth, glassy surface. It felt slippery and unyielding. She resisted the urge to smash her fist into it. If Halgrave hadn't been able to get

through, she had no hope whatsoever. The air inside the barrier was slightly hazy from smoke, obvious when compared to the crystal-clear air outside. The smoke was trapped inside, meaning it was likely completely impermeable. The Watch had said that it was soundproof as well.

"Amazing..." she said to herself, still touching the slippery magical wall. She sighed and stepped back. *And a giant pain in the ass.*

She'd gotten the story from the Watch, and seen the magic herself, but she still couldn't believe that the DKE was capable of something like this. Not the act of attacking the city itself of course, that she was more than capable of believing. No, it was the barrier that was simply impossible. The mana cost to sustain something like this would be astronomical. She'd never heard of any of the Citizens having this kind of power.

Ameliah kicked the snow out of the way to make herself some room and sat down on the ice to think. *It...might be time for me to move on. It looks like Tallheart got away, and Rain was probably with him. Jamus and the others might be trapped though...*

She sighed. *Yeah, it is definitely time for me to move on. I'm getting attached.*

Smoke drifted lazily from chimneys above the city walls. She shook her head. *Why am I like this? I care too much. Why can't I just...* She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

She didn't want to lose anyone, ever again, and the best way to prevent that was to keep herself at a distance. She'd believed that ever since she'd lost her father, drifting from city to city, never staying long enough to form a close bond with anyone. There was something about this latest group, however. Something that had her sitting on a sheet of ice in winter,

praying for them to be safe. Something that had made her run back here from Jarro without even stopping to rest.

She reached out to touch the barrier again, running her fingers along the smooth surface. This barrier...I can't do anything about it on my own. I'll have to hope that Halgrave gets the Guild to do something, or that the Watch retaliates. They just might. Until then, all I can do is hope that everyone in there is okay. There's no point to me being here. No point...

A gust of wind blew, sending swirls of snow drifting through the air and into her face. She pulled the cloak tighter as she watched the city. A few Watch officers were patrolling the walls. It looked remarkably normal, only the lack of morning traffic from the outlying farms standing out as odd. *I'll wait here for a little while and see if anyone comes out. The Watch will have set up regular status reports. I just need to wait for one, then I can learn what's really going on. After that...*

After that...

I don't know.

Rain walked through the streets of Fel Sadanis, Watch escort in tow. True to her word, Melka had kept out of his way as he went about his business. Whatever was bothering her—and it was obvious that something was—she didn't want to talk about it. She followed silently as he made his way toward the city gates.

He'd used the morning to take care of some small errands, stopping by the river to purify a new batch of water barrels and heading over to the bank to pay his taxes. The Bank enforcer

hadn't been there, but the clerk had taken his money and his badge number, so he considered that settled. Now, he was on his way to do another round of cooling. The air in the city was still stiflingly warm, his efforts before not noticeably having reduced the overall temperature. People were using fires to cook, the heat lifting the smoke up to swirl around the top of the dome. He had to constantly resist the urge to clear the air around him with Purify. It wasn't something he wanted to do on his own, lest he be forced to devote all of his mana to the task. He needed Citizen Sadanis to address the problem by doing something like banning cookfires.

At least we aren't going to suffocate.

He'd done the math. A dome with a radius of 2 kilometers had a volume of around 16 cubic kilometers, or 16 trillion liters. He'd rounded down to account for the stuff inside the dome, namely the city. The two-kilometer estimate was probably a little low as well, but it was good enough for his purposes.

From high-school chemistry, air was around 21% oxygen by volume. From a documentary on Everest, he knew that people started to have problems getting enough oxygen around 18% concentration, normalized to pressure at sea-level. People wouldn't really start dying or anything until closer to 14%. A human needed something like 550 liters of oxygen a day. As for how he knew that, he wasn't sure. He had a faint suspicion that he might have seen it during an episode of Jeopardy. Overmana was great for helping him remember tons of random crap, but it was hardly organized.

That meant that of the 16 trillion liters of air, only some of it was breathable oxygen. 21% minus 18% was 3%. That times 16 trillion came out to around 500 billion liters. That was how much oxygen was available for people to consume before they started getting symptoms of

oxygen deprivation. Assuming that there were twenty thousand residents, the math worked out to show an air supply that would last over 45,000 days, give or take. Plenty.

From a different documentary, this one on submarines, he knew that carbon dioxide buildup would also be a problem. Atmospheric CO₂ concentration had recently crossed 400 parts per million before he'd been whisked off to fantasy land. It was a safe bet that it was lower than that here due to the distinct lack of an industrial revolution. 400 parts per million was 0.04%, so practically zero. Once it got to 10%, symptoms included unpleasant things like nausea, vomiting, convulsions, and sudden death.

He didn't know how much CO₂ a person breathed out in a day, but that didn't stop him from trying. He got there with some chemistry, though he was a bit shaky on the process. The atomic weight of oxygen was 16, while carbon had an atomic weight of 12. There were two oxygens and one carbon in each molecule of CO₂, so that was a combined weight of 44. For the 550 liters per day of oxygen that a person breathed in, they would breathe out $550 \times 44 / 32$ liters of carbon dioxide, so 756.25 liters. Except that wasn't quite right. Only after he'd done the calculation did he remember that you needed to do the calculation in moles. That meant he'd wasted his time; one liter of diatomic oxygen made one liter of CO₂. The total mass of the air would rise over time as people pumped carbon into the air, but the pressure wouldn't change because of the ideal gas law. It wasn't a significant effect, but it was interesting to think about. Fun fact, when you lost weight, you actually breathed most of it out as carbon.

In any event, carbon dioxide buildup wouldn't be an issue either. The result of the calculation for CO₂ was on the same order of magnitude as the one for oxygen. They had years, which were 288 days long on this planet, incidentally. Or at least, they were in the calendar that everyone used around here. Staavo hadn't had anything to say on the subject of leap years.

Smoke, though, that was annoying. There was a constant haze over the city from the fires, both those started by Westbridge's battle, and the normal, ordinary wood fires that people were using for cooking. Soot, carbon monoxide, and who knew what else would be building up, and that couldn't be healthy, long term. Purify could deal with all of that, but he wanted to use his mana for other things, namely the cooling problem.

His calculations on suffocation gave him an order of magnitude result there as well. There were 16 trillion liters of air in the dome. The volume covered by a Refrigerate Nova was $(4/6) \times \pi \times 108 \text{ m}^3$. That came out to 2.6 billion liters. The air inside was around 35°C by his guess. A refrigerate nova brought that down below freezing; how far below, he had no idea, but not ridiculously so. It wasn't even, besides. The frozen area didn't quite extend to the full range with the settings he was using. To make it easy, he made the approximation that each Nova would cool the entire 2.6 billion liters to 0° C.

For a target temperature of 22°, he needed to cool 16 trillion liters of air times $(35-22)/35$. Six trillion liters. Six trillion by 2.6 billion was 2,308. It would be a little over two thousand Refrigerate novas, ignoring the heat that was being added to the system by people and fires and whatever runaway greenhouse effect was going on in here.

Light came in. Light was energy. Energy meant heat. Heat was bad.

Five hundred thousand mana. That was what he'd calculated. At 225 mana per nova, that was what it would take to cool the dome. It was a huge number, but it wasn't ridiculously huge. It was possible for him, with time, especially now that the mana siphon had dropped down to 50%. It would take him a while, but he could do it. Others like Mahria would probably start helping too, now that the mana restriction had eased up. He had been meaning to talk to her about it, but she hadn't been at the Guild when he'd stopped by to check. Either way, he'd allocated his afternoon to the task. He'd keep going as long as he could, stopping to rest his

legs and regenerate mana. If he held back on the sprinting, he figured that he would be able to keep it up for the whole afternoon.

"Oh, Oi! Rain! There ye are," a familiar voice came from behind him. He turned to see Kettel grinning at him.

"Oh. Hi Kettel. What—Wait, where did you get that?" Rain said, his eyes locking on to the hawk pin on the breast of Kettel's rough shirt. The finely-worked pin looked out of place on his linen tunic.

"Fancy, ain't it?" Kettel said, reaching up to touch the pin. "I joined the guard this mornin'. They'll take anyone, and it pays, too. At least, it will do. Anyway, I been lookin' fer ye. Wait there. I'll be right back. Two seconds."

"Hey," Rain said, reaching out with a hand, "wait a second, slow down. Why did you— Damn it, wait!" He sighed. Kettel had already disappeared around a corner.

"Someone you know?" Melka asked.

Rain looked at her and nodded. "Yeah, that's Kettel. He's...an acquaintance I suppose. I've only known him for a few days." *He joined the guard? Well, I suppose he would. It's a good opportunity for someone like him.*

"He seems a bit rustic. What—" Melka's question was interrupted by Kettel's abrupt return. He came around the corner, towing another teenager along behind him. The boy looked to be about the same age as Kettel, maybe a year or two younger. It was hard to tell, as he was afflicted with what had to be the worst case of acne that Rain had ever seen. The kid's entire face was red and lumpy with boils.

"Rain, this is Buggy. Buggy, Rain," Kettel said, pushing his friend forward. "See, told you I knew him."

"Uh..." Rain said offering his hand. "Nice to meet you...Buggy? Is that your real name, or..."

"Nickname," Buggy said, hesitantly reaching out to shake. "But my real name is worse, so..." He trailed off with a shrug. He didn't have even a trace of Kettel's thick accent.

"Anyway, anyway," Kettel said, interjecting and waving his hands. "I finally convinced em ta come see ye. Go on, Rain. Do the thing."

Rain blinked, then laughed. He knew what thing Kettel meant. This must be the 'grubby kid' that he'd mentioned a few days ago. He gave Kettel a look. "You're really pushy, you know that? I'll do the thing, but only because I want to," he said, failing to keep a straight face.

Kettel just grinned at him as Rain shifted his focus to Buggy. "You ready?"

Buggy nodded.

"What the hells is going on?" Melka asked. "What 'thing' are you going to do?"

Rain looked at her. "Purify. Just watch," he said to her, gesturing to Buggy's face. "You'll enjoy this, I promise."

He activated Purify, keeping the radius tight to include just their small group. He watched with anticipation as the misty white magic washed over Buggy's acne. Under the assault of the magic, the lumpy boils started to deflate before his eyes, the pus filling them being broken up

and drained away. Some of it oozed down his face, thinned out enough to drip free. It didn't make it far before completely evaporating, leaving Buggy's skin looking, well, not good, but much better. His face was still red and irritated, but no longer misshapen by the horrible boils that had afflicted him.

"What the fuuuuuuck?" Melka said, then laughed. "That was..."

"I know, right?" Rain said, flipping up his visor to reveal his grin. "Best spell ever." *That's more like the Melka I remember.*

"Wow..." Buggy said, reaching up to touch his face.

Rain smiled. *Another job well done.* He looked at Buggy. "If you want it to stay like that, wash your face every day. Use soap. If it gets bad again, just come find me."

"Thank you..." Buggy said wonderingly. "I never thought..." he gulped. The corners of his eyes looked wet. "For someone to waste healing magic on a git like me...Thank you, Night Cleaner."

Rain tsked. "Okay, one thing. Don't call me Night Cleaner. Literally anything else would be better."

"Yeah," Kettel said, turning to his friend. "I told ye not ta do that." He punched Buggy in the shoulder lightly, then looked at Rain. "Sorry Rain, I'm tryin', but it looks like it's catchin' on."

"Damn," Rain said with a sigh. "Maybe...come up with something else? See if you can get people to call me...I don't know. Something...not that."

"Mana Master?" Kettel asked. "Armored Slimehunter? The Black Death? Frosty Beacon?"

Rain's face paled. "Kettel...I take it back. There *are* worse things than 'Night Cleaner'. You're not allowed to pick names for anything. Ever. Just tell people to call me Rain. I don't need a title, nor do I want one."

Kettel laughed. "I'll think o' some good ones, don't ye worry. But, oi, listen, we gotta go. First meeting ah the guard an' all that. I'm jus' glad I found ye. By the depths that were somethin' to see. C'mon Buggy, play with yer face later. We gotta move."

Belatedly, Rain noticed that Buggy was also wearing one of the hawk pins. It had been hidden by the collar of his ragged shirt. If Velika was going to provide the members of her guard with some equipment, these two hadn't gotten theirs yet. Idly, he wondered where all of the hawk pins were coming from. Someone in the city had to be making them, unless Velika had brought them with her. He turned his attention back to Kettel, frowning.

"Hey, Kettel, listen. About the guard. Be...careful. I don't know what she's going to ask you all to do, but...try to be, I don't know. Just...don't be evil."

Melka snorted. "Good advice. The Watch isn't going anywhere." She looked down at the ground. "We might not be able to do anything about...about..." She grimaced, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. Her hand rose half-way to her throat before she stopped it, returning it to her side in a clenched fist. "About that woman," she continued, schooling her face back to passivity, "but we're still watching." She looked at Kettel, doing her best impression of Lamida's icy glare. "And we won't stand idly by."

"Uh..." Kettel said. "Don't worry, lady officer. We won't do nothing."

Rain looked at Melka, concerned. *That's like the twentieth time. What the hell happened to her?*

"Anyway, we really do gotta' go," Kettel said as the awkward silence stretched on. He started dragging Buggy after him. "See ye later, Rain."

"Thank you again...Rain," Buggy said. "I can't ever—"

"Don't worry about it," Rain said, raising a hand. "Go on. If I know anything about Citizen Sadanis, you don't want to be late."

Kettel waved to him, then the pair of them disappeared around the corner. Rain turned to look at Melka. She was looking back down at her feet again, breathing deeply with her eyes closed. He frowned. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she said, opening her eyes to glare at him, then looking away.

Rain sighed. If she wouldn't talk to him, there wasn't a lot he could do. "Okay," he said with a shrug. He looked toward the gate, then back at Melka and cleared his throat. "Um, I'm going to be using a dangerous spell once I get outside the city. The cold one. I'm sure they've told you about it. You probably don't want to stand next to me when I do it. Do you want to, like, wait by the wall or something?"

She shook her head. "Just go. I'll be...there," she said, pointing at a large building down the street, likely a tavern. "Come find me when you're done."

Rain paused. "You're sure that's okay? Lamida said..."

"I don't care what Lamida said," sighed Melka. "She can watch you herself if she wants to. Just don't make me have to come find you."

"Melka..."

"You know, I really don't understand you," she said. "What, do you like me or something? I'd have thought you would be happy to be rid of me."

He shook his head "Melka, I'm not blind. I can tell something is bothering you."

"And I told you, it's fine. It's none of your business," she said, turning and walking toward the tavern. "Don't make me wait too long."

Rain stared after her for a long moment, then closed his visor and headed toward the gates.

Ameliah sat up. Someone had come out. She'd been waiting all morning, but the Watch hadn't appeared, making her question whether they had some other way of communicating across the barrier. She peered at the figure, then shot to her feet.

"Rain..." she said, moving to lay her hand against the barrier. *Damn it, he is in there after all. Who else is with him? He's alone? What's he doing out here?*

Rain was walking down the road leading from the south gate. She was standing off to the side in the direction of the Watch's camp and it didn't look like he'd seen her. She waved, but Rain didn't notice. He was looking down at his feet, seemingly deep in thought.

Typical.

Ameliah started walking to meet him, hurrying to reach the spot where the road met the barrier. She had to fight her way through the drifts of snow. Rain stopped well before he reached the barrier, turning to walk away from her toward the river. As he did, he used Refrigerate, judging by the sphere of snow that expanded around him. He was walking slowly, his feet breaking through the crust of ice that now covered the muddy ground.

Why is he doing that? Gah, damn snow.

She stopped, preparing herself to use Purify. She released the spell in a Nova, the pulse of white light slamming into the barrier and flowing along the curve of the dome. It didn't do anything about the snow, but that wasn't what she was after. It was midday, but the spell was bright enough to be clearly visible. The sky was still overcast, which helped quite a bit.

Rain looked up at the sudden light, then his helmeted head turned to look at her. She laughed as he stared, then broke out into a sprint heading straight for her. He slipped on the ice almost immediately, going down hard. He recovered quickly, using his own blast of Purify to clean himself off before heading over to her at a more cautious jog. Ameliah smiled as he skidded to a stop, fumbling to remove his helmet.

He stared at her through the barrier, the two of them separated by the thin magical wall, no more than a hand in thickness. He was shouting something, but she couldn't hear a thing. She quickly tried using Message, but the spell didn't connect even though she could see Rain standing right in front of her. She shook her head and pointed to her ears, then gave an exaggerated shrug. She didn't need to be a good lip reader to be able to know what word Rain said next.

She caught his attention with a wave, then thought for a moment. *I highly doubt he's learned hand-code, but it has been a few days, and it is Rain we're talking about. Now, how did it go?* Slowly, she formed the sign for 'understand' then 'hand-code', then made the gesture to signal a question. She was hardly an expert at it herself, but she could hold a basic conversation.

Rain shook his head, then started digging in a leather messenger bag that he was wearing under his black cloak, coming out with a notebook. It wasn't the crinkled one of his that she remembered; this one looked brand new. He quickly scribbled in it, then held it up for her to see.

"Ameliah!!!!!!!" it said. She laughed. *Way too many exclamation points. He's such a goof.*

She watched as Rain took the notebook down and wrote frantically in it. He paused a few times as if thinking, then held it up again for her to see.

It read, "I'm fine. Val and Carten are trapped in here too. Have you seen Jamus and Tallheart out there? They aren't in here with me. Staavo either. I know you don't know him, but he'd probably be with Jamus. Old grumpy guy. Do you have a notebook?"

She shook her head, motioning for him to wait. She pointed to herself, then the Watch camp, then mimed writing in a notebook, then pointed back to herself, then to her feet. Rain smiled and took down the notebook to write.

"Got it. You're going to go get one. Nice mime. Just like old times. I'll wait here."

She smiled and gave him a thumbs-up, using the gesture that he'd taught her. She dashed off to the Watch camp and headed to their command post. Quickly, she negotiated with one of

the prospects who was working as a scribe, acquiring a stack of paper and pencil to write with. She thought for a moment, then scribbled on a piece of paper before dashing back to the barrier. Rain was still standing in the same spot as she pressed her note up against the wall.

"Rain!!!!!"

He laughed, then jotted down his response.

"Haha!" it read. His previous question was still visible, so she quickly wrote out a response, pressing the paper up against the barrier to write. It was difficult, as the paper kept trying to slip away. When she was done, she turned it over for him to see.

"No Jamus or Tallheart. Camp deserted. Watch doesn't have them. Will try to find later. What is going on in there?"

"DKE took over. Attacked city, raised barrier. Majistraal made it. Some artifact below the city. It drains mana to fuel itself. Velika (sword woman from the mine) is Citizen Sadanis now. How did you get here?"

"I ran. How is the city? Did the Watch fight back?" She paced as she waited for him to write his reply. *This would be so much easier if he knew hand-code. Damn it.*

Finally, he pressed the notebook back up against the barrier. "Really? How far is Jarro? It hasn't been that long... I am never going to beat you in a race, am I? The city is okay, I guess. Not great. Air is hot from the fires. I'm working on it. We've got plenty of water and plenty of food. Can't get out, though. Velika controls the barrier. Westbridge (other DKE Citizen) left after kicking Halgrave's ass. Not nice. Killed a lot of people. No Watch or Guild, though. Politics. Watch fought back, but lost. They are not happy, but Velika is mostly leaving them

alone. She hasn't done anything ~~bad~~ evil yet. Might have killed Carten with *snu snu*. Joke. Carten is fine. Probably fine."

What? She scribbled quickly. "*Snu snu?*"

Rain grinned as he wrote. She was relieved to see his smile; it was further confirmation that the situation inside wasn't as horrible as she'd feared. If he was joking around, then it couldn't be that serious. He held the notebook up once more. "Nothing to worry about. I will explain some other time. Carten is fine. I saw him yesterday. If he died, he died happy. Where is Halgrave? Is he alive? Is the Watch going to do something about the barrier?"

She shook her head, writing to respond. "Halgrave left to talk to the main branch. The Watch is pissed. There's nobody important out here, though. They say that if their organization retaliates, it will be a huge mess."

Rain nodded, then looked behind his shoulder at the city. He turned a page, then wrote slowly, as if thinking about his words carefully. He tore out the page and crumpled it up, tucking it into a pocket before starting again. He stared at the page for what felt like minutes. His face looked pained as he labored over the words. More time passed with each sentence, his expression growing darker. Ameliah looked on with concern at the pain written on his face.

He made to hold the notebook, then hesitated. Finally, he shook his head and pressed it up against the barrier. "The first few days in here were bad," it said. "I saw some horrible things. People in pain. Blood everywhere. Fire. Rubble. Dead kids lying twisted, buried in the rubble..." The next few lines were scribbled out. "Things are getting better, but I can't stop myself from remembering. From seeing the bodies. From thinking that there was something more that I could have done. I wish you'd been here, but if you had, then you'd be trapped too... Sorry." There was a gap, then a single line at the end. "It was awful." Another gap, then another

crossed-out line, but not well enough that she couldn't read it. The same line was written again below it, not crossed out this time. "I missed you."

She felt her chest clench as she looked at him after reading the message. His face looked tight, as if he was fighting back tears. Her mind flickered, dredging up her own dark memories. She'd seen some horrible things too, and what Rain had written had dragged them out of the corners in her mind that she'd stuffed them into. She shook her head and wrote quickly in large letters, then underlined what she had written.

"It will be okay."

He shook his head, placing his hand up against the barrier. She pressed hers against it, mirroring him, trying to give him some comfort through the unyielding magical wall. The hint of a smile returned to Rain's face and he moved his fingers into a V shape with his thumb extended. She attempted to copy him, figuring that the gesture had some significance. It was difficult to stop her little finger from spreading away from its neighbor. His smile grew a little wider as he watched her push her fingers into line with her other hand. The frictionless barrier wasn't helping matters. She gave up as Rain stepped back to write in his notebook again.

"Sorry, the hand-against-the-glass cliché got to me. I couldn't resist. Remind me to tell you about Wrath of Khan once I get out of here. It's a movie, from my world. The hand symbol means 'live long and prosper'."

"That sounds like a farewell," she wrote, holding up the paper for him to see. He frowned before responding.

"It is, at least in that scene. Don't worry. I'm getting out of here, one way or another. At the very least, they said they'd take the barrier down when the war is over. I hope it is months, not

years. I don't know that we'd last years. They'll have to let us out before it gets to that point. They have to."

She shook her head, writing quickly. She underlined it again. "It will be okay."

He smiled sadly, jotting down his response. "I hope so."