

271: Refreshment

Primer on Big League Etiquette

Compiled by Reece

The 'Big League,' as we've been calling it, doesn't have a real name, or rather, it doesn't have any singular name that's firm enough for it to be official. Rulers, champions, self-styled demi-gods—anyone who's gold and knows enough about the soul to make other golds insignificant.

That's the thing, you see. Past a certain point, you can ignore what others try to do to you, no matter the ability. Your pet maniac did as much when she was hiding in Three Cliffs, so you already know what I'm talking about. At Silver, you can't stop her, but neither can your average Silver stop *you*, even if you haven't realized it yet.

Back to the point. I hope I don't need to explain how such casual superiority could make a person dismissive of those beneath them. The unfortunately common perspective amongst such people is that if someone's not good enough to see your soul, they're not worth talking to.

Who is worth talking to, I hear you ask? Well, there's Burrik for the Guild, Nem and Olicia for the Watch, and Jien, Omar, and Kenn for the Bank, plus a few others. The Rellagian monarchs. The family heads of Xiugaara.

Kev.

Have I mentioned you should stay away from Kev? Etiquette doesn't apply. He's top asshole, so he does what he wants. He's a natural disaster, not a person, and all the world is thankful that all he wants is to fight things.

Anyway, with that notable exception, those I listed all have followers. I don't have time to make you a full map of the hierarchies and relationships among the movers and shakers. Learning to judge your station against someone on the fly is the point of all this.

That brings me to the first 'rule' of the Big League: don't hide your power. Knowing where the other sits in the hierarchy is fundamental to knowing how you should comport yourself. Some, like Nem, never hold back, letting their domains spill out and leaving no question about their strength. Others are more reserved, but you can generally expect the power someone shows you to be not that far off from their actual strength. When you meet someone near your level, they might put the squeeze on you like you did to Luna. If that

happens, you squeeze back. Think of it like a firm handshake between gym bros to settle dominance.

The second rule relates to physical territory. You're expected to behave when you're in someone's area of operation. You announce yourself exactly as Nem did, then wait to be acknowledged as a guest. You pull in your domain rather than invade that of your host. On neutral ground, you tune it to harmlessly overlap instead, just like if you were in a party. The degree to which people can do this varies greatly, but you're expected to at least make the effort.

The third rule is also about territory but in the metaphorical sense. You don't go into business against the Bank, just like you don't start your own quest-fulfilling organization. Yeah, you messed up, but it's not as dire as you think. The mewling of puppies is of no concern to the top dogs, and you can use that dismissiveness to your advantage. Still, expect a talking to from Burrik once he gets his head out of his ass enough to recognize you as real competition. As for Jien, your Bank situation is going to get a lot worse before it gets better. All the more vital that you form alliances.

The fourth rule is honor. Competition and infighting are par for the course, but nobody wants a direct clash at this level of power. Too much collateral damage, and I'm not even talking about ripping the fabric of reality. Proxy wars are the name of the game. If you've got beef with someone, you throw your pawns against their pawns, your knights against their knights, and so forth. See all of Relagian history. In practice, honor means propriety of station, hearkening back to rule one. You're expected to show deference to those above you, compete fairly with those on your level, and ignore the slights of those below. You don't take hostages, and you don't punch down. What Jien did, forcing your people out of Xiugaara by throwing his soul around, was rude, to say the least. Find a way to mention it to Nem, and he'll have your back against him in the future.

The fifth and final rule is that you don't spoil the game. There's some tolerance, here, but if people get it in their heads you're trying to elevate all of Ascension to the level of the Big League, they will shut you down, *hard*. Us rich, powerful assholes like the status quo. There's a reason the Bank, Guild, and Watch have stood for thousands of years. Threaten that stability, and someone will take it upon themselves to remove you from the equation.

Don't rock the boat until you can swim.

Dossier on Warden Nem

Compiled by Reece

Birth Date: 2968-11-14

Male, muscular, mid-40s apparent, salt-and-pepper hair, neat beard, large stick up backside.

Awakened, level 74 (confirmed 3030)

Base Class: Fortifico (Rare)

Silver Class: Fist of Life (Legendary)

Gold Class: Fist of Transference (Legendary)

Guardian of the Watch since 3024

Warden (claimed) since 3061

Nem is, to use your phrasing, a total pain in the ass. You'll probably like him.

If I had to describe him less flippantly, I would say he is a stickler for the law. Watch law, specifically, laid down not in some pithy handbook but inherited and seasoned by more than a thousand years of precedent. If there's a 'just' thing to do, Nem will do it and damn the implications for himself, the organization, and those affected. His unwillingness to 'play the game', as it were, is simultaneously his most endearing and his most infuriating feature.

You cannot trade favors with him. Do not try. If there's something you're obliged to do, whether by law, writ, or his own definition of right action, then you should have already done it without needing to be asked. He will thank you for a job well done but never praise you for it or reward you with anything but additional work.

At the time of writing this, he's in his nineties, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. It goes without saying that he holds himself to an even higher standard than that which he demands from everyone around him, and that includes his physical fitness. Like you, he started as a Monolith, but a Fortifico, the Strength version. He didn't keep it past Silver, following the footsteps of legends past—or should I say 'legend past'—to become the only Fist of Transference since the class's discoverer. Don't ask me who that was, because I don't know. Not in the memory banks.

Mechanically, the things he transfers with his class are vitals and stats. Think of your Well and Empire skills, but with punching. Punches to steal Strength, Health, Mana, and whatever else, adding them to his own reserves plus an unapplied bank he can dip into at need.

You'd think he'd be a battle maniac, with a class like that, but he actually isn't. The punches work in both directions. He's actually one of our best off-spec Healers—not just because he can punch the literal hurt out of you, which he can, but because he can bludgeon your soul back into shape while he's doing it. If I'm being honest, he's better with his soul than I was, though in finesse, not strength.

When you meet him, he'll immediately realize you know more than you should, but he won't kill you for it out of hand. He might not even press you, but that will change if he thinks you're passing dangerous knowledge out willy-nilly, so watch it. Go read the other primer I gave you if you haven't yet.

It goes without saying that you won't be able to lie to him. I don't care how good you think you are. He's better. Picture Sana at his age and level, minus all sense of humor, and you've got the idea. If he asks you something and you don't want to answer, be honest in refusal. Don't deflect, and gods-above-gods, don't manipulate your domain in front of him until the day he trusts you as much as his wife. Yes, he's married, and he's got kids. You don't need his family tree.

Bottom line: he's a rigid ass, but you can trust him. The hard part will be getting him to trust you.

Rain strode through the forest, not too fast, not too slow. Purposeful, dignified, with all trace of his railroad exertions wiped away by Purify and a half hour's rest. He wore his full armor beneath his Ascension jacket, collar adorned with the captain's golden arrow and the three pips denoting his rank. On his right breast, he'd fastened both his watch and Guild plates. Dozer—with much effort—had been convinced to go inside and stay there.

Ahead, there was a massive soul, on par with those of the monsters he and Ameliah had found dwelling in Xiugaaraa. The moment he'd become aware of it, it had already been moving toward him, matching his pace and intent. In the face of that, he felt so, very small.

If only he could have felt alone.

[So, what will you do when you see him?] Reece asked in his mind. [You know, that awkward point where the two of you spy each other through the trees, but it's too far to say hello. Give him a little wave? A head nod?]

[Did you not JUST promise to be good?] Rain asked, his eyes latching onto movement centered within the emerald leviathan of Nem's soul. Only then did he realize there was a second soul beside it, tiny in comparison.

It was still on par with Halgrave's.

[Tanergal?] Reece mused to herself. *[How unexpected. And yes, I will be 'good', especially if you're going to react like that.]*

Rain worked his jaw, focusing on maintaining his steady pace as he reviewed what he knew about Nem's companion. It wasn't much. Tanergal was the Watch's youngest Guardian, who Sana said was a reformer. He was popular for his attitude toward advancement within the organization, but she'd never met the man personally. He didn't have long to consider it before figures emerged through the trees, right where their souls indicated they'd be. Thumbing its nose at conventional geometry, Nem's colossal soul remained crammed within the confines of his physical body, though his domain billowed forth just as Reece had promised.

There was no head nodding.

True to Reece's dossier, Nem looked closer to forty than to ninety, a powerfully built man with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and a neatly trimmed beard to match. He wore armor—banded mail embossed with the shield emblem of the Watch—but carried no weapon, rather, a leather document folder. His eyes were the same brilliant emerald as his gargantuan soul.

I never did ask Reece about my eyes. Too many things.

Rain shifted his focus to the other Watch member. Tanergal was young, and unlike Nem, Rain

had the immediate suspicion that his age matched his outward appearance. He was in his mid-twenties, with brown hair, a clean-shaven jaw, soft blue eyes, and a rounded, almost dog-like nose. His apparent cuddliness was at odds with the distrust rolling off his brick-red soul—a counter-example for soul-eye theory.

“Custodian Rain,” Nem spoke first, filling that one word with so much more.

The core of it was: *You are more than I expected. Why did you not respond to my greeting?*

“Warden,” Rain greeted back with a tiny nod, doing his best to reply in kind.

I did not recognize it as such.

Nem narrowed his eyes, his soul radiating a mixture of suspicion and surprise, but he didn’t press further. He gestured toward his companion. “This is Guardian Tanergal.”

But you already knew that, was the subtext.

“Custodian,” Tanergal greeted.

“Pleased to meet you both,” Rain said, a shiver running down his spine.

Without warning, there was a sudden spike of annoyance from Nem, then Tanergal stepped forward, extending a hand.

“You will forgive me, Custodian,” the Guardian said. “Before we proceed with this meeting, I must verify your plate. I also ask that you remove your helmet.”

Rain relaxed. *Ah. It wasn't anything I did. Nem must have wanted to meet me alone. Politics?*

Adopting a smile, Rain smartly removed his helmet. His armor wouldn't do a damn thing if this turned bad, and it certainly wasn't doing anything to hide his emotions. Tucking it under one arm, he unhooked his Custodian's plate and tossed it to the red-souled Guardian.

Tanergal's eyes widened in shock, and he moved like flowing smoke to snag the plate out of the air. Cradling the literally priceless object, he fixed Rain with a scandalized glare.

Nem loudly cleared his throat, looking at his subordinate. "Can we hurry this along?"

"This is genuine," Tanergal said tightly, glancing at him before returning his glare to Rain. "You should treat it with more respect."

"Was there a risk you wouldn't catch it?" Rain asked.

"Peace," Nem said, raising a hand with mild amusement, then taking the badge from Tanergal and stepping forward to hold it out. "Your badge of honor, Custodian. I ask that you refrain from further attempts to lighten the mood."

"Noted," Rain said, taking the plate to refasten to his chest.

"Now let's see where we stand," Nem said, reaching into the leather folder to remove what Rain immediately recognized as the copy of Ascension's codes. "A most interesting document." He held it up, his eyes locked onto Rain's face. "Do you honestly believe all of this?"

Rain froze, feeling the sudden spotlight of Nem's focus centered directly on him.

Honest and direct.

He hesitated for only a moment. "No."

"Oh?" Nem asked, raising an eyebrow.

Rain nodded. "That document is a compromise. I agree with most of it, but there are some policies that I fought against because they're flat wrong. There are plenty more that are naive, ripe for exploitation, or otherwise problematic." He shook his head. "So, no, I don't believe everything in there. I do, however, stand behind it. As captain of Ascension, it is my duty to uphold the codes as agreed upon by our democratic process. They're better than anything we had before, even if they're a work in progress."

"Good," Nem said with an honest smile, and the tension drained from the air. "You can Read, yes?"

Tanergal inhaled sharply.

"Yes," Rain replied after a long moment. It hadn't really been a question.

"Then Read me and know we are allies," Nem said, the truth of that statement vibrating the very air as he tucked the book away. "I have several disagreements with the contents of this book as well. More than you, I suspect, and I would enjoy discussing the contents with you at a later time. For now, I have prepared a secure pavilion for us to speak of more important matters. If you are unwilling to enter our camp, we can conduct our talk out here, but there is no need to spurn comfort."

"You aren't worried about Divination?" Rain asked.

"Not from you or yours," Tanergal said. "Unless you are saying you can't control your people? How did you learn to Read?"

"Peace, I said," Nem repeated sternly.

"It's fine," Rain said. "I'm paranoid too. It's why I'm still alive. That said, if the pair of you wished me ill, there would be nothing I could do to save myself wherever we are. And so, I agree. There's no need to spurn comfort. I'm glad to accept your hospitality."

"Hmph," Tanergal said as he looked away.

"Come, then," Nem said with an approving nod before he turned and walked away.

Rain followed in silence, glad for a brief reprieve to order his thoughts. It didn't last, as soon, the Watch camp came into view. He wasn't so crass as to try Detection, so he pulled in his domain and used his eyes, estimating there to be as many as five hundred Watch members busy setting up in the clearing they'd felled in the trees. The military level of order came as no surprise at this point. Tents were going up in neat rows, packs of Officers patrolling around the outskirts as Geomancers worked to further flatten and clear the ground. To his more esoteric senses, power hung in the air—formal runic Wards, of course, but also myriad defensive and other abilities.

So many...

"Just here," Nem said, cutting through the bustle unchallenged to enter a large, open-sided tent. Rain felt the Wards on the structure tickling against his skin as he stepped under the

canvas. The orderly noise of the camp vanished as if by a switch.

"Refreshments, should you be the type to expect them," Nem said, waving a hand at a laden table. "Wine, fruit."

"I'm more of a coffee man," Rain said, surveying the table only to freeze, stricken, before dashing forward. "What are these!?" he demanded, though he knew what they were.

Yellow, curved, beautiful, *beautiful* bananas.

"Apeberries?" Tanergal said, looking at him strangely.

"Good name!" Rain said with a delighted laugh, lifting one with all the reverence he hadn't shown to his plate earlier. "Where did you find them? I've been looking everywhere! Do you know where they grow?"

"Antener, I expect," Nem said, naming a smallish city on the southern coast. "We stopped there briefly before our passage inland."

"Don't they trade them?" Rain demanded. "How could they not? I couldn't find them in Xiugaaraa."

"Custodian," Nem said gently, gesturing toward a table set up with a trio of chairs. "I am glad the refreshments are to your liking, but control yourself. You may speak with our logistics administrator once we have dealt with more important matters. Now, please."

"I...yes," Rain said, moving to the table with his delicious prize. He dared not open it. Not yet. If it was full of seeds or stingy pulp or something, it would be a terrible disappointment,

meaning a long process of selective breeding to rectify the situation.

"He's definitely a Dynamo," Tanergal said, taking another of the chairs. "At least that part of his assessment was right."

"Mmm," Nem said. "Take a note to update that. Category ten."

Rain froze, as did Tanergal, looking sharply across the table. "Ten? For a silverplate? Really?"

Nem nodded. "He could destroy this entire camp from where he stands in an instant were I not here to contain him. Fortunate that he is our ally."

"I would never—"Rain began only to be cut off by that now-familiar palm.

"Peace," Nem said. "Set down your helmet and fruit, and let us speak."

"Right," Rain said, doing as instructed. He took a moment to collect himself, then took a deep breath. "So. Why are you here?"

"There has been a rebellion," Nem said flatly.

"Shit," Rain swore. "How bad?"

"A near-total coup," Tanergal said sourly. "I alone stand with the chosen successor of Warden Vatrece, preserve her memory. The rest follow the usurper."

"And who is that?" Rain asked with a grimace. "Olicia or Annerlain?"

"Olicia," Nem said. "If you had met the woman, you would not have needed to ask. Annerlain is a follower and always will be. My follower, until he betrayed me and everything the Watch stands for."

"I...see," Rain said.

"I feel your misgivings," Nem said, his voice a warning. "We may be the minority, but we are the true Watch. Olicia and her misguided supporters will be brought to heel. You have my word."

"I believe you," Rain said quickly. "Warden Vatrece told me that you were her pick, after all."

[Careful!] Reece warned.

"Did she?" Nem said, turning to look at him. "And when was this, exactly?"

Rain swallowed heavily. "Months ago, in Barstone, before she went crazy and took over the DKE Citizens."

"So, you do not deny being involved in her disappearance," Tanergal said. "We will want a full accounting of everything she did and said."

Rain hesitated, then shook his head. "There are some things I will not say. She invaded my mind and demanded my memories, citing the risk to the world overriding her principles. I am not keen to repeat that experience. Some secrets are my own."

"You have my apology for her actions," Nem said after a long pause. "That said, Ally, it is your duty to share the events as they happened. Start at the beginning." His face twisted. "Omit

what you must.”

[Perfect!] Reece cackled with glee. [I don't know how you did it, but you'll have him eating from the palm of your hand in no time!]

Rain closed his eyes, then let out a long sigh before opening them again. He'd made his decision. "Actually, I think I'll start at the end," he said, pointing a finger at his own head. "Don't freak out, but I've got Vatrece's memory construct playing house guest inside my skull."