

115: Camp

As the forgewagon crested a small rise in the road, Rain spotted Ameliah waiting for them in the distance, standing next to a wooden bridge over a frozen stream. She had the hood of her cloak raised, and Rain was sure that he'd have missed her completely had Detection not warned him that she was there. He raised his hand to wave, and Ameliah waved back. Instead of slipping back into the trees, she started walking toward them.

"Looks like we're stopping here," Rain said to Tallheart, pointing. "Distance should be close enough. Drive over the stream before you stop. We'll probably end up melting it when we camp, so we'd better do it now."

Tallheart nodded, pulling back on one of the levers, sending them crunching off the road and down toward the bank. It looked like he had decided to drive straight over the ice rather than try the bridge, which was probably wise. *That thing looks like it's on its last legs.*

They crossed without incident—the stream wasn't that deep and was probably frozen through. Rain's legs were burning as he dismounted from the bouncing forgewagon, and he almost fell as his knee buckled. *Hmm. I guess it's not as healed as I thought.*

"Problem?" Ameliah asked, walking up to them.

"Hurt my knee," Rain said. "I healed it, but it looks like the damage was worse than I thought. I'm not very good at judging levels of pain anymore. Physical pain, anyway." *Damn headaches.*

"Here, let me see," Ameliah said, laying her hand on his shoulder. Rain forced his face to remain neutral as he felt Tissue Scan sweep through him. *She doesn't know that I know what that skill actually does. Play it cool, Rain. It'll only be weird if you make it weird.*

"Yeah, you definitely hurt it. You've got a torn ligament."

Rain shivered as the rush of healing flowed through him. Barely recognized aches and pains vanished in an instant as his health overflowed his cap, leaving him with only the dull throbbing behind his eyes. "Whoa."

"How did it happen?" Ameliah asked.

Rain rubbed at his neck, "Uh, I kinda did it to myself. Imbalance. The ring, you know?"

"Have I mentioned how ridiculous that thing is?" Ameliah asked, glancing at Tallheart.

"Yes, you have," Rain said. "Tallheart says he'll make you one, by the way, as soon as we can find another Arcane GranCryst. Seems like something like that would be pretty useful for a Jack. All your stats are equal, right?"

Ameliah nodded. "Yes, they are. As nice as it would be to have something like that, it wouldn't really work for me, though."

"Why not?" Rain asked.

"It's a Jack thing," Ameliah said with a shrug. "Balance works better."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, not looking up from where he was fiddling with something underneath the forgewagon. "I can make something more suited to you once I have the materials."

"You really don't have to," Ameliah said, "but thanks."

"Mmm," Tallheart said.

Ameliah's eyes flicked to the side, and Rain turned to see Vanna approaching them. "We're stopping?" she asked, looking at Ameliah questioningly.

"I think we should," Ameliah said, glancing at Rain playfully. "Do you agree, Captain?"

Rain snorted. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"Good," Vanna said. "I was about to say something if you didn't call a halt soon. A few people are having trouble. I think we should slow down the pace a bit tomorrow."

Rain frowned. "You're probably right, but I don't like hearing it. It'll take us forever to get anywhere at this pace. How hard do you think I can push them before they start hating me for it?"

Vanna considered for a moment, then shrugged. "We can *try* to keep this pace, I suppose. Managing a company is a bit different from a work crew. I knew how much my crew could take, but..." She shook her head. "I couldn't tell you if the ones having trouble are actually at their limits, or if they're just whiners. I haven't known them long enough."

"We will march for as long as is needed," said Tarny, having joined them as Vanna was speaking. "Lord Rain, do not concern yourself with such matters. Your task is to lead; ours is but to follow."

Rain thought he hid his sigh admirably. *Who talks like that?* He didn't bother telling Tarny to stop calling him 'Lord.' There was no point. "Thank you, Tarny, but I don't want anyone to hurt themselves by working too hard before they're ready. I'll call a few more stops tomorrow for rest, but we'll be marching the whole day, instead of just half."

"Yes, my lord," Tarny said, bowing.

"No bowing, Tarny," Rain said. "For the last time."

"Sorry, my lord," Tarny said.

Rain did sigh this time. He glared at Ameliah, who was smirking at him. "What?"

"Nothing," she said, turning away. "I'm going to get started on the fortifications. It shouldn't take me more than an hour. Do you want to set up right here?"

"One moment," Rain said, checking with Detection. He didn't feel any significant sources of metal in the earth below them, so he nodded. "Nothing around that's worth moving for. There's a bit of iron in the soil, but not much. Unless you're low, Tallheart, I wouldn't bother."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "I am fine at the moment. Ameliah, if you would not mind, I would prefer some walls so I may rest in peace."

"Sure," Ameliah said. "Whatever you'd like. I'm going to set up a few partitions anyway so we can have some privacy."

"Thanks, Ameliah," Rain said. "Do you need any help?"

Ameliah shook her head. "I'll be fine." She pointed. "I left a Stumper in the trees over there. If you want to get some people breaking it down, that would be good. I'm hungry enough to eat the thing raw at this point. I shouldn't have skipped breakfast."

"I'll see it done, my lady," Tarny said, bowing to her. She rolled her eyes but didn't correct him.

"Get Carten and Jamus to go with you," Rain said, hiding his smile as he glanced at Tarny. "I don't sense anything around, but you never know, even with the trees. Speaking of, pass out the axes. We'll need firewood."

"I'll take care of all that stuff," Vanna said before Tarny could reply. "Anything else, Rain? What are you going to do?"

Rain considered. "I'll go wander around, I guess. See how everyone's doing and listen to any problems they're having so I know what needs fixing. After that, I'm going to work on the codes. I want to talk to people about that once we're dug in. Ameliah, do you think you'd be able to do some healing once you're done with the walls? I'm guessing we'll have some blistered feet to deal with. Is that too frivolous, you think, using Healing Word for something like that?"

"I don't mind," Ameliah said. "It's not like mana is a problem with you around."

Rain grinned. "On that note, I should find Kettel. He needs to rank up his spells. I'm gonna make him in charge of starting all the fires. Something to keep him out of trouble."

"Cunning, my lord," Tarny said. "You are killing two birds with one stone, to use your expression. Perhaps three birds. I will find him and send him to you."

"Thanks, Tarny," Rain said, glancing at him. *Asskisser.*

"Before I forget, Rain, here," Ameliah said, tossing him a sack. "That's everything that I found today. There's something like a hundred Tel, plus a couple Chem-Crysts. No Cold Crysts, even though I ran into some new Cold-Aspect monsters out there. I'll go over them later once everyone has eaten."

"Awesome," Rain said, peering into the sack. "How much of this do you want to keep? You did all the work, basically. I need to write down the rules for how this stuff works."

"It's fine," Ameliah said with a shrug. "A hundred Tel makes no difference to me. But you're right; others are going to care. Whatever you do, make sure you keep the math simple. I'm still not convinced I understand that whole Rankin thing, and you've explained it to me like six times."

"Simple, right. Probably for the best," Rain said, laughing. "At least until after math class. I'll see if I can come up with an idea, and we can discuss it along with the other thing."

"What other thing?" Vanna asked.

"Rules for who gets priority for blues and such. That's the main thing I wanted to go over tonight. We need to straighten that out before we actually find one. Maybe I can find a way to solve both problems at once. Anyway, daylight's burning. Let's get to work."

"Daylight is burning," Tarny repeated as if tasting the individual words. "You have a marvelous way with words, my lord, as always."

Rain pinched the bridge of his nose. "Tarny, nobody likes a brown-noser."

"A...brown...noser?"

"I'll explain it to you later," Rain said.

Rain stood surveying the gathered members of Ascension. They were standing in a large open room of mud walls with no ceiling. The walls were thicker than they were tall and would be sufficient to stop a Stumper. Smaller monsters could climb them, but those could be dealt with by the defenders. At the moment, there was nothing in range of Detection, and little chance of something spawning nearby. The closest trees had been felled, providing fuel for the fires burning atop the wall. A few of those also had been set up with cauldrons, filled with chunks of both river-ice and Fungiform Stumper. *Delicious.*

There was a gap in the wall that led to a similar room, except with some partitions to break up the space. That room was to be for sleeping, while this one was for more general use. The sleeping-room was deserted at the moment, as Rain had called a meeting. The main room was cramped with everyone gathered, thanks to the fact that the sleds were in there with

them. The forgewagon, at least, was still outside. Ameliah would put some walls up around it later to keep it safe overnight.

Rain cleared his throat, and when no one reacted, clapped his hands sharply, then waved. "Attention, everyone. We've got a few things to talk about." After waiting a few moments for the conversation to die down, Rain cleared his throat again. "Right. So today, we marched for eleven point nine kilometers. There're five kilometers to the league, more or less, so that's a little over two leagues. I'm going to be teaching you all about kilometers later tonight; don't worry about it now. We're going to try to keep up this same pace tomorrow. As slow as that is, we'll be going for the whole day, or until we reach the village of Essed, whichever happens first. Any questions about that before I start on what we're doing for the rest of the day today?"

Several hands rose.

"Yes?" Rain said, pointing at Mahria.

"Are you going to let us loot Essed?" she asked.

"Yes, though that isn't the term I would use," Rain said, nodding to her. "There are likely supplies there that we will need. We'll look for survivors first, then give any dead we find a proper funeral. Only then will we take what we need. That includes coins, Tel, Crysts, and the like, which are of no use to the dead. All of that will get split up according to the codes, which is one of the reasons I called this meeting."

"Good," Mahria said. "As long as you're not going to do something stupid like burying their valuables with them."

Rain frowned at her tone, but he decided not to make an issue of it, as he'd seen something else that needed dealing with. "Staavo," he said, staring at the old man who was fiddling with the generator near the back wall.

"What?"

"Would you mind leaving that alone until I'm done talking please?" Rain said.

"But it's almost—ow!"

"Thank you, Jamus," Rain said, shaking his head. "Anyway, the codes. As the captain, I've decided that I want anyone to be able to submit an idea for a new rule or a modification. Anyone who has an idea can call a meeting like this, and then we'll discuss it and have a vote. If there's more than seventy-five percent in favor, it gets added to the codes. On that note, that will be the first thing we add. All in favor, raise your hand."

Rain raised his own hand to demonstrate. After a moment, a few more hands joined his until about half of the members had their hands raised.

"Excuse me, Rain," said Samson, who didn't have his hand raised. "I have a comment, but I can't raise my hand without voting. May I speak?"

"Go ahead," Rain said. "You can put your hands down, everyone. We'll have a little discussion, then we'll vote again."

"Thank you," said Samson. "I have a question on the rule you just proposed. Won't it be chaos if everyone is allowed to just submit rules? Won't we be spending all of our time voting on ideas if just anyone can submit stuff whenever they want? Wouldn't it be better to just have a

few people in charge of working on the codes, then only call a vote when they feel it is ready for everyone?"

"Good," Rain said, nodding. "Yes, eventually, we'll want to do something like that. A direct democracy—everyone votes on everything—really only works when you don't have that many people. Fifty is already pushing it. Like I said, though, it's not just adding stuff, but also changing it. This first rule is only so we have something to use as a base to build on. We can amend it later."

"I suppose I can agree to that," Samson said, nodding.

"Anyone else?"

"Who is in charge of writing all this down?" asked Romer.

Rain shrugged. "I made sure to bring plenty of paper. Are you volunteering?"

"I suppose I am," said Romer. "I am a scribe, after all."

"Great, thanks," Rain said. "Okay, let's have another vote. Hands up if you think it should take a seventy-five percent majority to modify the codes. Romer can figure out some formal language for the rule later, and we can have another vote to confirm it. For now, we're just going on the spirit of the thing."

Hands started going up, but someone spoke up before Rain finished counting.

"What is seventy-five percent?"

"Hmm?" Rain asked, searching for the speaker. "Finn, was that you?"

"Yeah," said Finn.

Rain spotted him and nodded. He hadn't had much of a chance to talk to him after the entrance interview; he only knew that the man had been one of the merchant's guards trapped in the Lee. His full name was Finnbogi. "I'm sorry, what was the question?"

"What does seventy-five percent mean?" Finn asked. Rain blinked. *Oh.*

Percent was a thing—Staavo was familiar with the concept at any rate—but most people used smaller fractions.

"Percent just means 'in one hundred'," Rain said. "Seventy-five percent is seventy-five in one hundred, or three in four. Since there's fifty of us, that's thirty-seven and a half, so thirty-eight votes needed to add something to the codes."

"Oh," said Finn. "Got it. Thanks."

Rain nodded. "I figure that not everyone here is going to be an expert scholar, and there's no judgment if you aren't. Nobody should be ashamed of not knowing a thing. If you need help, just ask someone. I'll be teaching math, reading, and writing later, starting with math and units tonight. Winter should make things a bit easier, but we're getting off track again. Anyway, hands up for the vote on adding stuff to the codes."

Hands went up. Rain counted, then smiled and stopped. "Unanimous. Great. That should do to get us started. Now, to formalize a few things, let's see." He cleared his throat. "I hereby submit the following for inclusion in the codes: The leader of Ascension is called the 'captain'

and is responsible for the company's day-to-day leadership. The captain decides where the company goes, what jobs they take, and is nominally in charge of everyone when it comes to company matters. The captain's decisions can be overruled by a seventy-five percent majority, provided that the situation is appropriate for calling a vote. If overridden, the captain must go along with the group's decision or be replaced. If the captain steps down or is removed for any other reason, the next captain may be elected by a simple majority." Rain looked down. "Again, we can figure out better wording later. I just want something in there so it's clear what my job is. No vote yet, questions first. Anyone?"

Lyn raised her hand. "Does the captain get to pick who gets awakened?" she said.

"Good question, Lyn," Rain said, turning to her. "The answer is no. That's a recipe for abuse of power. Nepotism and so forth. That's actually the other of the two main things I want to get straightened out at this meeting. Like I said yesterday, the captain isn't a king. They're only in charge of the day-to-day."

"This is all very vague," said Romer without raising his hand.

Rain nodded. "I know. I'd say sue me, but we didn't bring a lawyer."

Lyn snorted. Atyl, Staavo, and a few others looked amused. Most people had blank looks, which was what Rain expected. Lawyers were a rare breed. Disputes in Fel Sadanis were mostly taken care of by the Watch, and they didn't have a lot of patience for legal proceedings.

"Anyway, we can formalize all of this later once we've got some precedent set up," Rain continued. "For now, you just let me know if I'm overstepping what you think the captain should be able to do. Otherwise, just do what I say, mmkay?" He smiled to show that he wasn't entirely serious.

"What if I wanna be captain instead?" said Kettel loudly, a shit-eating grin on his face. "I just need ta' get people ta' vote fer me?"

"Yes, actually," said Rain, hiding his annoyance. "That's the whole point. If someone can win over seventy-five percent of the company, then obviously people think they'll do a better job of it than the current captain is doing. I just want to formalize it in the codes before I move on to what I actually wanted to talk about this afternoon."

Kettel opened his mouth to speak again, but Rain raised his voice, riding right over him.

"Okay, let's have another vote: office of the captain as I've outlined. Hands up if you're in favor." He raised his own hand.

Rain's eyelid twitched as no less than three people spoke up, interrupting each other in their efforts to be heard. A sudden, resounding clang made Rain jump and startled the speakers into silence.

Tallheart lowered his hands. The noise had been him slamming his gauntlets together. "I tire of this," he said. "Vote." He raised his hand, staring at the crowd.

Hands went up.

"Forty-one to nine," Rain said with relief. "Good enough. Motion passed." He nodded to Tallheart. "Thanks."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled.

Rain rubbed at his eyes. *Man, this is what I get for trying to half-ass a constitution.* "Okay, next, moving to the subject of the company's resources and our policy on loot," he said, looking back up at the crowd. "Firstly, I'd like to put a person in charge of keeping track of all that, and making sure everyone has what equipment they need and so forth. Quartermaster, to use the nautical term."

He cleared his throat. "The quartermaster of Ascension shall be nominated by the captain and confirmed with a simple majority vote. The quartermaster shall be responsible for managing the company's finances and equipment, including seeing that all members are properly outfitted. The quartermaster shall also serve as second-in-command for any issues not requiring the captain's direct attention. Hands up to vote on adding that to the codes."

Rain raised his hand. Mercifully, there was no discussion, several people glancing at Tallheart and clearly thinking better of opening their mouths. The motion passed with a large enough margin that Rain didn't bother to count.

"Right, that passed," he said. "So, now I'd like to nominate someone for the office. Vanna, would you be willing?"

Vanna blinked. "Uh," she said, looking around as the crowd looked at her. "Wouldn't someone like Ameliah be better?"

"No," Ameliah said. "Leave me out of this."

"Perhaps someone with...more experience with such things," Atyl said.

"Ye mean a noble," Kettel said accusingly.

"I didn't say that," said Atyl.

"No offense to Vanna," Mahria said, waving a hand dismissively, "I'm sure she's fine, but I think it would be better to have an awakened as your second in command. Someone who can back up their authority with some, you know, actual combat capability. Someone with experience as an adventurer. If not Ameliah, then maybe I could—"

"No way I'm letting someone like her boss me around," said Smelt. "And watch what you say about my sister, or I'll thump you, awakened or not."

"What do you mean, someone like me?" Mahria demanded. "I'd like to see you try it, you—"

"QUIET!" Rain roared, his already-strained temper snapping like a dry twig. "Vanna is my nominee," he said, slashing his hand down with finality. "Vanna, are you willing?"

"Y—Yes," Vanna said after a moment. Rain blinked, then looked at her. She looked rattled. Looking around, she wasn't the only one. Some of the other unawakened had actually pulled back, and Cloud was cowering behind Meloni. Rain forced himself to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Damn soul leakage. Damn headache.*

He shook his head, unwilling to apologize for his outburst. He was still annoyed—at Mahria and Kettel in particular. "Simple majority vote," he said. "Hands up."

Rain counted, glaring his best glare until the threshold was met. "Good, Vanna is quartermaster. Anyone who doesn't like it, tough. Next, let's talk about what she's going to be doing." Rain held up a notebook. "In here I've written down a list of all of our equipment, plus monetary assets. Right now, the company has around a thousand Tel, plus half that in copper.

We've also got some Crysts: thirteen Chem, eight Heat, and seven Arcane. That was all I could find before we left, plus what Ameliah gathered today when she was scouting."

He paused, taking another deep breath. "For reasons of transparency, anyone is welcome to check the books whenever they want. As Quartermaster, Vanna is authorized to manage this wealth as she sees fit, including buying whatever the company needs. Vanna, I'll leave it to you to set some rules for yourself, and we can formalize it all in the codes later. In general, for small stuff, you should just deal with it, but if it's something big, like buying everyone plate armor, we'd want to have a little oversight. You okay with that, Vanna?"

"That's...a lot of responsibility," Vanna said. "What about, like, wages and stuff?"

"Good question," Rain said. "Let's move right on to that. It's all related, so here's what I was thinking. We're going to work on a system of credits, with one credit being one tenth of a Tel. For example, when we were attacked by slimes earlier today, everyone fought to defend the company, so everyone gets some portion of the rewards. That was thirteen Tel, which works out to two-point-six credits each. You can either cash that out into copper, or leave it under your name in this book." He waved the notebook around.

"It will work like that for everything, with the rules for a specific job being determined before we do it. For example, tomorrow, when we loot Essed, I was thinking we just split everything up evenly; otherwise, Ameliah and I would dominate because of Detection and Attract. As another example, Ameliah brought in one hundred and three Tel today, plus three Chem-Crysts, all of which she donated to the company. She did that on her own, so at four Tel to the Chem-Cryst, she earned herself one thousand one hundred and fifty credits. As I donated six thousand Tel to get things started, I'm sitting at sixty thousand credits, not including the two-point-six from today's slimes."

Rain spotted a few raised hands but ignored them. He wasn't done explaining.

"Now, there's an obvious problem with this in that Vanna is going to be using the actual Tel and such to buy things like food and supplies next time we hit a city. If everyone cashes out, the company won't have enough physical money to cover it. That brings me to the next point, which is why I think we should bother with something like credits in the first place instead of just using Tel. For one, I don't want to deal with physical currency. Counting out Tel is a pain in the ass. Credits, on the other hand, can be exchanged just by moving some numbers around in the quartermaster's ledger. It's like how the Bank's coins aren't worth the same as the metal they're made from, just taken one step further by doing away with the metal altogether."

"Rain," Staavo interrupted. Several others had lowered their hands, but not him. Rain frowned, looking at the old scholar.

"Perhaps you can finish explaining the nuances of representational currency another time," Staavo said. He looked around, speaking to the crowd. "Rain is just saying that your share of the loot will get held by the quartermaster until you want it."

Rain sighed. "Basically, yes, but there'll also be some things that you'll only be able to buy with credits. I'm thinking we use them as a means of determining who gets awakened. Whenever we find a blue and circumstances allow, we'll let people bid. The winners get the blue, and their bids get subtracted from their credit totals. Therefore, it's in your best interest to donate as much as you can to the company if awakening is what you're after. If we set it up right, the company should build up some cash for the airship fund, while all the members still get paid."

"That's still not any different than working in Tel, but okay," Staavo said.

Rain shook his head. "It isn't just going to be Tel that let you earn credits. I want the system to encourage people to do things that help the company, even if there's no direct value in it. Things like healing the sick and charging magic items and so forth. I was also thinking we add some credit-offsets for things. If someone who's already awakened wants to bid on a blue, they'll have to pay more. As much as I'd like to raise my cap from eighteen to nineteen, it would do the company a lot more good to take someone from zero—unawakened—all the way to nineteen instead, especially if they decide to specialize as something like a healer."

Rain swept his gaze over the sea of confused faces and sighed. "I'm not even going to bother calling a vote on this right now. Let's just talk about the credit idea until the soup is ready. I didn't just want to drop something on you like this without everyone getting a chance to share their opinion, as it's going to shape everything that the company does going forward. If we can't come up with something we're all happy with by the time we're done with dinner, we'll just keep working in Tel for tomorrow. I still want to save time for math class, and then we'll have tonight's defense to discuss." Rain sighed, rubbing his neck. "Hand's up if you've got something to say."

Dozens of hands shot into the air, and the throbbing behind Rain's eyes seemed to double on the spot.

By the steady light of an oil lantern, Romer scanned over the text of the page in front of him. Satisfied, he set down his quill and reached for the blotter. It wouldn't do to have any smudges. "There, that's the third page done," he said once he was finished dabbing at the ink, then slid the page across the small folding table to Vanna, who was scribbling on a page of her own. The soft sound of a flute could be heard from the other side of their muddy fortress,

and, looking around, Romer saw that more evertorches had been lit, the sun having finally slipped below the horizon. The monsters would be coming soon.

With a sigh, Vanna looked up, then spun the page around to glance over it. She crinkled her nose. "Are you sure it needs to be this formal?"

Romer snorted, reaching down to his lap to scratch Nibs behind her ears. In response, Nibs pushed her head into his hand contentedly, the continuing thrum of her purring proof that he was doing his job properly. The warmth of the cat on his lap was comforting against the chill of Rain's Winter.

Vanna sighed as she continued to read.

"Our captain, whatever else he is, seems to be a bit of a dreamer," Romer said, watching Vanna read as he continued scratching Nibs the way she liked. "Fortunately for him, I know what I'm doing when it comes to this stuff. Being a scribe is more than just copying lines and having neat handwriting. It's about translating intent."

"I'll have to clear this part with him," Vanna said, pointing. "I'm not sure he's going to like making people pay dues."

"He told us to come up with a goldsink, so I did," Romer said with a shrug. "It's just to cover things like food and recurring expenses like lamp oil, canvas, and so forth."

"What is a goldsink again?" Vanna asked. "Sorry, I've got those strange numbers of his bouncing around in my head from that damn lecture. Doesn't leave a lot of room to remember all of the other crazy stuff that he was saying."

"A way to remove credits from circulation," Romer said, giving her an understanding nod. His own brain still felt a bit wrung-out from trying to unpuzzle the concept of how *nothing* could be treated as a number. "Don't ask me why he called it a 'goldsink' and not a 'creditsink', though. I have no idea." He tilted his head. "Where is Rain from, anyway?"

"I don't know," Vanna said. "He always dodges the question."

"Mmm," Romer said, lifting his hand from Nibs's neck to pick up his quill once more. "A mysterious man, our captain. So clever about some things, and yet, so clueless about others." He gestured to the page. "I still can't believe he tried to set something like this up by committee. People don't know what's best for them, and that's a fact."

Vanna sighed, sliding him a stack of notes. "I trust him. I'm sure he could just set up some ridiculously complicated system on his own, but he won't do that. He wants us to understand how it works and why it is the way it is. Whether you think this whole credit thing is a good idea or not, that's what really matters. He isn't forcing things on us."

"Isn't he?" Romer said, raising an eyebrow. "What was that...pressure...that he used? I always feel a bit on-edge when he's around, but that was on a different level."

Vanna sighed. "Don't worry about that. He can't control it, or at least, he says he can't. All it really means is that he was annoyed, which was completely justified, in my opinion."

Romer opened his mouth, but his planned inquiry got cut off in a strangled shout. He lunged for his inkwell, barely saving it from toppling and spilling ink all over the table. "By the depths, Nibs, be careful!"

Nibs lashed her tail dismissively, then settled down directly atop his notes. She stared up at him smugly, as if to say, "This is what you get for not paying attention to me, human."

Staavo looked up at the noise, but not seeing any apparent source, looked back down at his notes. He was sitting on the ground, using his company-issued shield as a writing board, lacking a proper table. Night was falling, and the unsteady torchlight was irritating him with each flicker.

Unfortunately, without flowing water, the generator was useless. The entire thing had been rebuilt after a series of discussions with Rain back in Fel Sadanis. It now had a coil of alchemically-coated copper wire, wound much tighter and more evenly than the old paper-wrapped steel greatbow cable. It also was about twice the size, with a second chunk of ferrous iron—a magnet, to use Rain's word—added to double the 'magnetic field'. To accommodate the second magnet, the entire thing had been re-configured such that magnets remained stationary, while the wire spun instead. The coil was now what Rain called an 'armature' with a pair of 'slip-rings' to keep the wires from getting tangled. It was ingenious. Not being able to use it was infuriating.

If he could just figure out some way to turn the thing without having to crank it manually, they'd have all the light they ever needed. Magic was the obvious answer, but he had no Crysts, nor any skill as an enchanter. Besides, he didn't want to use magic. Rain had said that it was possible to do without.

Asking Rain was the next obvious answer, after magic; however, Rain was busy up on the wall somewhere. Even that wasn't an obstacle, not really. Staavo could have asked days ago, but he wanted to figure it out himself, and he'd been focused on the generator at the time. Rain

obviously didn't consider it a priority; otherwise, he would have come over to help of his own volition.

Staavo glared at the evertorch, then looked away, the glowing afterimage of the flames drifting across his vision. Evertorches were regrettably sufficient for their needs. They didn't give off much heat, but they had bonfires and idiot Fire Mages for that. There was no *need* to get the generator working.

Damn it.

Staavo returned to his notes, determination driving his pencil as he sketched a piston, like the ones Tallheart had been building earlier for the suspension of his forgewagon. Rain had talked about something called a 'steam engine.' They hadn't gotten into details, but the name of the thing was enough. If he could get steam to push the piston somehow, then he could connect it to a gear, and then use that to drive the generator. One campfire and a pot of boiling water could light the whole damn camp. Staavo smiled as he sketched, reveling in the challenge.

Never underestimate a scholar.