

172: Grading

"Captain, Vanna wants ta know when yer—"

"Shhh..." Rain whispered, lowering his finger from his lips. He looked away from Kettel, returning to gently stroking Ameliah's hair as she slumbered. After completing her story, she'd cried for a long time, as had he, just holding her as she sobbed. Eventually, she had fallen asleep, and Rain wasn't about to let someone like Kettel wake her with his foolishness.

"She using ye as a pillow again, Cap?" Kettel asked, grinning. "Yer luckier'n a golden donkey, ain't ye?"

Rain gave him a look. "Keep your voice down."

"Sorry, sorry," Kettel whispered, raising his hands. "It's just, Vanna's gettin' anxious wi' the two o' ye out 'ere alone. She said ta me," Kettel cleared his throat, "If they're risking this entire camp just so they can have sex, I'll—"

"Vanna did not say that," Rain interrupted, carefully shifting Ameliah so he could get to his knees. "Read the room, Kettel, and grow up. If you want people to stop treating you like a child, stop acting like one."

"Aw, come on, I was jus' havin' some fun with ye," Kettel protested, scratching at his ear.

Rain ignored him. Gently scooping Ameliah up, he rose to his feet. Despite his caution not to wake her, she screwed up her eyes. "Whatar...o..do...ing?" she mumbled without opening them.

"Carrying you, obviously," Rain said with a smile. "This is no place to be sleeping."

Ameliah sighed, not opening her eyes as she snuggled against him. "...okay..."

Rain's chest tightened, both with love and with the absolute certainty that if anyone ever harmed her, he would delete them from existence. They would never find the body. Purify would make sure of it.

Turning away, Rain moved gingerly toward the camp, taking care to jostle Ameliah as little as possible. "Helmets, please."

"Wha—oh," Kettel said. There was a pause, then Rain heard a clink of metal accompanied by a sharp intake of breath.

"Don't wake up Dozer," Rain said without looking back. Midway through Ameliah's story, the tired slime had woken, only to move from Rain's empty bowl into his helmet before promptly falling asleep again. Rain tracked Dozer through the king-link as Kettel picked up the armored slime, then hurried after him.

"What were ye three talking about, anyway?" Kettel asked as he broke even.

"Personal stuff," Rain answered tersely. He spotted Vanna, then angled in that direction. To his credit, Kettel finally seemed to get the hint and didn't press further.

When Rain reached Vanna, she took one look at the slumbering Ameliah, then directed Rain toward a piece of canvas that had been rigged up between the trees as a shelter. Beneath it, someone had laid out a pair of padded quilts as well as Dozer's crate. Rain gingerly set Ameliah down on one of the blankets while Kettel deposited their helmets nearby.

"Thank you, Kettel," Vanna said softly. "That will be all."

"See ye later, Cap," Kettel said, flashing Rain a thumbs up, then departing with a grin.

Vanna snorted softly. "He does what he's told, at least. I need to talk to you about Mahria."

Rain nodded. Working slowly, he slid Ameliah's helmet onto her head and locked the visor in place with its new latch. Sleeping with the helmet on wasn't comfortable, even with the enchantments, but if the Empire attacked in the night, he couldn't risk Ameliah being hurt. It was bad enough that the pair of them had been unhelmeted while she'd told her story. A sneak attack could have come at any moment.

"Rain?" Vanna asked. "Mahria?"

"Is she still upset about the accolade?" Rain replied, lifting his own helmet. Tilting it, he jiggled it until the slime within slid free to land in his proper bed. The king-link twitched, but Dozer didn't stir.

"She says you broke your promise," Vanna replied as Rain turned back to face her.

Rain shook his head slowly, slipping his helmet back onto his head, then lowering the visor to latch it in place. "As I have told her many times, I never promised to just *give* her a respect plate. If Emerton chooses to sell it to Ascension, she can use credits to buy it, just like anyone else."

"She says we shouldn't have given the vault's contents back to him in the first place," Vanna replied softly. "She called a vote. I don't think she'll get enough of the Entrusted on her side for it to pass, but... We can't have division right now, Rain."

"I know," Rain said, rubbing his neck. "When's the vote?"

"Tomorrow night. That was the best I could do."

Rain nodded. "Good. I'll talk to—no. You talk to Emerton tomorrow morning. Ask him if he's willing to speak with me. He might not be, but if he is, that's a good sign. I think he could pass the test. If he joins Ascension, convincing him to part with the accolades becomes a whole lot easier with how the codes are written. If he doesn't want to join, I'll talk to Mahria. See if I can get her to understand. If all else fails...I will do as the vote decides."

"As you say," Vanna said, looking at Ameliah. "Is she okay? I made sure nobody got close enough to listen in on the three of you, but it was hard not to notice your body language, let alone...what came after."

"Kettel somehow managed it," Rain said wearily. "And yes, she's okay. Or she will be. She just needs rest."

"What about you?" Vanna asked. "I know you didn't sleep on the way here. Whenever I stopped by to check on you, there you were, fingers wiggling away."

"I had too much to do," Rain said, glancing longingly at the second quilt. "And Velocity is motion, while Winter is stillness. I'm not sure I could use it while sleeping without practice."

"How long has it been since you slept, anyway?" Vanna asked.

"Too long."

Rain shook his head slowly, then did the hardest thing he could think of. He walked softly over to the quilt, then gently laid himself down. "I'll rest now. Tallheart said he would stand watch tonight." He didn't mention that the antlered smith had been up for just as long as he and Ameliah had. Someone had to stay on guard. It would be his turn to sleep soon enough.

"Wow," Vanna said, blinking. "I...didn't expect that."

"I have done all I can, and far more than was wise," Rain said, tilting his head to look at Ameliah's slumbering form beside him. "I'm not such a fool that I can't see it. It's not enough, but it never will be. It is a risk to stop, but pushing forward would be riskier still. Tomorrow, if I am lucky enough to wake and find myself still breathing, I will pick myself up and continue. That is all I can do."

"Wow..." Vanna said, sounding stunned. "I...don't know how to respond to that."

"You should sleep too," Rain said, closing his eyes. "We have a long way to go."

Progress Report

marker_1: endnight [3060 Breaking 32 15:54]

marker_2: marathon2 [3061 Promise 02 06:42]

Span: 1.6 days

Skills

Fulmination: 2 -> 10 (+8)

Tolerance

Recovery: 70 -> 71 (+1)

Vigor: 112 -> 113 (+1)

Attribute Buff: 253 -> 254 (+1)

Synchronization

Focus: 44.3 -> 48.4 (+4.1)

"Hey, tulip," Val said.

Rain looked up from the table, dismissing his progress report in time to see Val slip an arm around Vanna's waist. She kissed him lightly on the cheek in return.

Rain blinked placidly through his open visor, mentally adjusting their relationship status from 'off-again' to 'on-again' for what had to be the third time. He yawned, leaning back in his chair. "Morning, Val."

"Morning, Rain," Val replied, stifling a yawn of his own. "You made me lose a bet. I had you down for going another two days before you finally passed out."

Rain snorted. "Why am I not surprised?"

Val smiled, then reached into a pocket and tossed a small vial in Rain's direction. "Here, from Reason. He said he made it twice as strong as last time. Well, I think that's what he said. You know how he is. What is it, anyway? He made me promise to bring it straight to you without opening it, not that I would have. Funnily enough, he spoke plainly for that part."

"Poison," Rain replied, after catching the vial. He inspected the metallic yellow liquid within briefly, then pulled out the cork and downed the contents.

Chemical Effect Activated

Augmented Kaikera-Quicksilver Poison

414 Chemical damage per second for 13 seconds

3 Chemical damage per second until purged

He read the text calmly, activating Chemical Ward and adjusting the spell to be as inefficient as possible. *Finally above my resistance.*

"O...kay..." Vanna said. "Were you joking, or...?"

"No. If I were unawakened, I'd already be dead. As it is..." Rain shrugged. "Tastes like sour cherry." He raised a hand, forestalling Vanna's response. "I'll be fine. Just training Chem Ward."

Val laughed. "That's the way!"

"I knew you would approve," Rain said with a snort, looking up to check on Ameliah. She was easy to spot by the telltale green rings of Energy Well. They were rising around dozens of people at a time as she wound her way through the bustling camp. When Rain had woken,

he'd found her nestled beside him, with Dozer squished between them like a stress pillow. They'd stayed like that for much longer than they should have. Smiling, he looked back down, only to have his thoughts interrupted by Vanna.

"Here he comes, Rain," she said, stepping away from Val and straightening her cloak.

"That didn't take long," Rain replied, following her gaze. He got to his feet, removing his helmet and placing it on the table. Quickly, he flared Purify, purging the lingering poison from his system and—more importantly—clearing the residue from the empty bottle. He tucked it and the cork into a pocket, then turned to greet Emerton.

"Captain," Emerton said, politely inclining his head. "Commander."

"Val," Val said, unprompted, introducing himself with a gesture. "Professional *lemming*."

"What's a lemming?" Emerton asked.

"Depths if I know," Val replied easily.

Rain smiled before shaking his head slowly and returning to seriousness. "How are your eyes?"

Emerton grimaced. "Better," he said, reaching up to hover his fingers above his brow. "Still sensitive."

Rain sighed. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about what happened."

"I'm sorry too," Emerton said, letting his hand fall. "And thank you for saving my life."

Acknowledging him with a nod and not wanting to linger on the topic, Rain pressed on. "I understand you took the test this morning."

"I did," Emerton said, seeming to take hold of himself. He held out a large envelope. "They said it was okay if I brought this to you myself as long as I didn't break the seal."

"Thank you," Rain said, taking the envelope. He inspected the wax briefly, then broke it with a finger, folding back the thick paper of the envelope to extract a thin sheaf of pages from within. Removing the paperclip—one of the simplest bits of technology he'd brought to this world—he rifled through the pages. The test had always been given verbally in the past, but the volume of new members had made that impractical, so it had been streamlined.

Morality, as determined by multiple choice.

Not all questions on the test were equal. Some were instant fails if answered incorrectly, and others were control questions with no weighting whatsoever. The rest were basic stuff—less trolley problem, and more 'slavery is bad, yes or no?'

Nodding to himself, Rain tapped the pages against the table to straighten them, then replaced the paperclip before scribbling a number with his personal red pen. Grading complete, he held the test out to Emerton.

"I don't recognize these symbols," Emerton said, looking down at the test as he took it. "What do they mean?"

Vanna peered over his shoulder, then whistled. "It's your grade. Ninety-four percent. Nice work."

"Welcome to Ascension," Rain said, standing and extending his hand. "You'll get used to the numbers."

"O...kay..." Said Emerton, shaking Rain's hand firmly. "Thank you, er..." He tilted his head. "Captain?" he tried.

Rain smiled. "No special address needed. Not for me, and not for anyone. Vanna, how are we doing on those FAQ pamphlets?"

"I'm working on it," Vanna replied, glancing at Rain before returning her attention to Emerton, holding out a white cloak. "Here. If you need any other basic equipment, see Smelt, our quartermaster." Emerton took the cloak from her hands, and she pointed vaguely off into the trees. "He's over there somewhere. Black hair like mine, sideburns like a poorly trimmed hedge. Yes, you can tell him I said that. In fact, please do."

Val raised a hand, covering his mouth.

Vanna continued without missing a beat, sounding almost bored. "Basic gear is free for Aspirants, but keep in mind that it's not to be sold or given to others. If you need anything outlandish or otherwise in high demand, you'll need to pay, and for that, you'll need to be on the books. I won't be able to sort that out until we stop for the night. Until then, just do what you've been doing. There'll be an orientation for you and the other noobs today or tomorrow."

Rain grinned.

Emerton mouthed the unfamiliar word, then gave a minute shake of his head, apparently having decided not to ask. "Thank you." He hesitated. "About that deal, the one for the accolades. Can we discuss that here?"

"Go on," Vanna said. "Quietly, though. We don't talk about accolades in the open, as a rule."

Rain nodded in agreement. *The last thing we need is for Mahria to hear you.*

"Right," Emerton said, glancing around and lowering his voice. "I'm sure everyone knows I've got them by now, but you're right. I can feel a target on my back. For that reason, and in light of some other information that has come into my possession, I've decided to sell them."

"Oh?" Rain asked, his interest piqued even further. "What other information?"

Emerton hesitated, then leaned forward to continue in a bare whisper. "I started decoding the papers from the vault. I know how to find the family lair."

"Nice!" Val said, then raised his hands as Vanna shushed him.

Rain grinned. *Finally, some good news.* He leaned closer, Vanna and Val bringing their heads in as well as he continued in a whisper. "And it's on our way, I take it?"

"It is, or else I wouldn't have mentioned it," Emerton whispered back. "It's rank nine. Heat aspect. I have one condition, however, before I tell you any more. I want a chance at an Essence Monster, assuming we find one inside."

Rain scratched his beard, thinking out loud. "The codes aren't set up to handle that. Awakening works on a credit system, and we have rules to stop rich dickwads from buying their way in. We'd need a council vote to get around it, but I don't see that as an issue, given what you're offering." He glanced at Vanna. "What do you think? I'm sure no one would disagree, given what's to be gained."

"I also decoded a recipe for some fairly delicious butter scones, if that makes a difference," Emerton interjected with a tiny smile. "It too could be yours."

Vanna chuckled. "Well, I wasn't convinced, but now I am. To answer your question, Emerton, yes, you'll end up with more than enough credits to bid for a slot. Don't worry about the vote. It's more about formalizing the precedent than deciding anything. Forget the accolades, you're bringing us fifteen awakenings. You're going to be swimming in credits." She glanced at Rain. "I'll handle it quietly today as we march. It should be trivial to get a majority. Emerton, I'll get you the list of priority classes a little later."

"Priority classes?" Emerton asked. "Wait, did you say *fifteen*?"

"It'll be in the orientation," Vanna said, leaning back quickly. Her tone became urgent as she continued at a normal volume. "Hakim and sons, incoming."

Rain frowned, then straightened to see Lord Hakim and his sons indeed approaching. His frown turned into a predatory grin as he saw the envelopes held in their hands, though he quickly hid the expression. "Apologies, Emerton," he said. "It appears that I have more applicants to process. I'll find you before we leave today, and we'll settle up. Until then, if

anyone asks about the items we discussed, you tell them that you already gave them to me. Particularly if the person asking is named Mahria.”

“Right, Vanna already warned me about her,” Emerton said, glancing between Rain and the approaching nobles, clearly wanting no part of it. “Good luck with Hakim.”

“Thanks,” Rain said, nodding to Emerton as the man hastily retreated.

“Oh, this is gonna be good,” Val whispered, rubbing his hands as Hakim and his sons came to a stop.

Rain shot him a look. *You’ll give it away!*

“Good morning, Rain,” said Lord Hakim, oblivious to their exchange. He held out the envelope he was carrying, and after a moment, his sons did likewise. “I know you prefer it when I cut straight to the point, so I won’t waste time on frivolities. They said we should bring these to you.”

“Good morning,” Rain replied in a civil tone. He accepted the envelope from Lord Hakim, then gestured to the table as he sat. “Place the others there.”

Not bothering to inspect the seals before breaking them, Rain began grading, finding what he’d expected. With each ‘perfect’ score he verified, he wrote a number atop the test, then stacked it to the side. Once he was finished, he kept his face expressionless as he rose, then offered the pile to Lord Hakim.

They didn't even try to make it look convincing. Hells, not even for the 'favorite color' question. All four of them picked blue! I don't care if it's one of their house colors. So is silver. One of you pick that. Seriously, glue must be a delicacy in the Hakim household.

"Ah, perfect scores all around," Lord Hakim said, barely even looking at the graded tests as he passed them out to his sons. "Well done, everyone. As expected of our noble house."

"What language is this?" the youngest Hakim whispered, looking at his paper and receiving a helpless shrug in response from his nearest brother.

"It says one hundred percent," the elder Hakim replied, nodding sagely. "Ascension uses a special code to simplify mathematics. All down to the genius of their leader."

"It says seven hundred, actually," Rain said, ignoring the shameless flattery and pointing to the first digit he'd written atop Lord Hakim's page. "Sorry, my handwriting can be a bit sloppy."

It wasn't. Not this time. Hakim clearly couldn't read the numbers any better than his sons. He might have done a bit of research, but he was still stuffed utterly full of shit.

"I...pardon, Rain, but I do not understand," Lord Hakim said, looking down at the digit Rain had indicated. "Seven hundred percent?"

"No, seven hundred Tel," Rain replied simply.

He waited, watching as first realization, then horror, spread across Lord Hakim's face.

"Exactly what you paid for the answers, was it not?"

Val broke, doubling over and howling in laughter, stumbling, then leaning against the table for support. All around, work stopped as people looked to see what the commotion was.

"You...!" Lord Hakim spluttered. "I didn't— This is a mistake, I..."

Vanna placidly offered Rain her fist, keeping her face entirely composed. Rain—having considerate difficulty doing the same—bumped it. He turned back to the Hakims, then flicked his fingers at them in a shooing motion. "Go on, then. Off with you."

"I... I... I... AHHHG!" Lord Hakim gnashed his teeth, apoplectic with rage. He struggled for a few more moments, then whirled on his heel. "Come!" After a moment, his sons followed. They at least had enough self-awareness to hang their heads in shame.

Only then did Rain break, covering his eyes as he tried to suppress his laughter. He had an image to maintain.

Vanna was less restrained in her amusement now that the game was up. Her laughter joined Val's, making it even harder for Rain to keep the giggles inside. He quaked silently for a good thirty seconds, but eventually, he forced himself to take a deep breath, then wiped at the corners of his eyes.

Damn, I needed that.

He beckoned. "Val."

"Yeah?" Val managed, still struggling to master himself.

Rain jerked his head in the direction the nobles had gone. "Ghost them for a bit, yeah? Feel free to step in if it looks like they're going to do anything stupid."

Val barked another laugh, then clapped Rain on the back. "Smart thinking. It would be my pleasure." He cracked his knuckles, then faded into invisibility. The spell failed to mask his continuing snickers as he padded off through the trees.

The Empire didn't attack that day.

Nor did they attack the next.

When they camped that night, it was the first time no monsters assailed their perimeter. They didn't stop keeping watch in the nights that followed, however, nor did they stop setting up the generator. People had grown accustomed to sleeping in the light, and Rain wasn't about to rush them in abandoning the habit.

Days passed, each starting with Detection to make sure no one had been left behind. Samson steered them southward, following Emerton's instructions. The man didn't have anything as convenient as a map to the lair; he just knew a vague direction, distance, and the landmarks to look out for on the way. If Ameliah hadn't been able to scout from above with the telescope, they'd have been in trouble.

Despite growing tolerance to Velocity, the pace of the group actually decreased compared to the first day. Part of that was due to the reduced fear that the Empire was following them—Ameliah's scouting went a long way, there—and part of it was due to the increasing ruggedness of the terrain. Mostly, though, it was just that the average townspeople wasn't conditioned to march from sunup to sunset for days on end, no matter how much magical assistance they received. They had old people. Pregnant people. Kids.

Morale was good, though. Those that hadn't joined Ascension rallied around Mayor Dempton, leaving just the small groups that had chosen to stand with the Hakim and Urs families.

While those two continued causing Rain no end of grief, it was nothing compared to the stress that came from the nebulous threat of the Knives. Only the council and a few others knew about that. They'd decided to keep it quiet for fear of causing panic.

Rain was sure that the constant worrying would have left him as a wreck by the week's end if not for Ameliah. She was handling the whole situation much better than he was. A great weight seemed to have been lifted from her chest once she'd told her story. She seemed happy, somehow, despite the constant fear of death and the weight of the responsibility she'd taken on. Rain wasn't blind, though. He could still see tension in her posture when she thought he wasn't watching, and he knew she was having headaches from the amount of mana she was using. Thus, he started making a point to massage away whatever tension she had each night. She allowed it, but only under the condition that he allowed her to return the favor.

It was nice.

The threat of the Knives meant they had to keep their armor on, so these evenings weren't as relaxing as they could have been, but it was nice.

Tallheart was clearly stressed too, but he worked it out in a different way. Each night, when they stopped, he would set up his mobile forge, then work for hours after the sun had set, hammering aluminum into swords. Aluminum wasn't the hardest metal, so it would never hold an edge as well as steel, but it was light and they had plenty of it. Tallheart did admit that part of his reason for using it was to build his familiarity with its intrinsic rune, which he said was the path to discovering whether there was a deepened version.

Rain was trying not to get his hopes up.

It was still exciting enough without that tantalizing prospect. Tallheart had destroyed all of his first attempts immediately after finishing them, calling them failures and embarrassments to smiths everywhere. The last three blades, though, he had judged worthy of being stamped with Ascension's symbol. He'd given them to Ellis, who had finished them by adding wooden handles with leather wrapping.

The final, durability-enchanted aluminum longswords weren't bound. They were in Ascension's common armory now, to be rented out to whatever company member needed them. As time went on, no one would need to carry table legs to battle ever again.

Unless they wanted to. People were weird.

The day after Tallheart finished the third sword, Ameliah finally spotted one of the landmarks on Emerton's list. It was an old, abandoned hunter's shack, fallen to rot, barely visible from above at all thanks to the trees encroaching on its clearing. It was a miracle that she'd seen it, all the more fortunate in that Rain had been close to calling off the search and angling them back northward. With the trail found, it was easy enough to follow Emerton's directions, and within another two days, Samson called an early halt, much to everyone's excitement.

"It's just ahead, there," the Freelord said, leading Rain past the edge of the camp as people busied themselves setting up to stay a while.

They wouldn't be lingering long—in and out, that was the plan—but despite Rain's best efforts, knowledge of the lair had escaped from the meetings discussing the class slots. Thus, everyone knew why they'd stopped. For most, the prospect of resting sore feet was more

exciting than whatever wonders lay inside, but not within Ascension. The bidding had been fierce.

Samson led Rain to a cave in the side of a hill, guarded by a pair of Aspirants, then inside. The passage wound for no more than a few dozen meters before the light of a fire ahead became visible, and then, Rain was standing before the blazing barrier, like a wall of flame. This lair was Heat-aspect, obviously, and rank nine according to Emerton. There were more guards posted here as well, all Entrusted. Lyn and Mahria were lounging near one wall with their boots off, holding a private conversation. Jamus, in contrast, was standing right next to the barrier, alert and ready.

"Hey Jamus," Rain said, laying a hand against the barrier as Jamus nodded in greeting. He watched the lair's rank and depletion status appear, the numbers drawing themselves from ash on the flaming surface. The magical envelope was pleasantly warm, and from this close, he could hear it like the gentle crackling of a fire. "Anyone go in yet?"

"Carten is in there now," Jamus replied. "Don't worry, it's safe enough, and he knows better than to leave the entrance."

"There may be more ways to access the lair than just this passage," Samson explained. "The last thing we need is anyone getting any ideas. If a full team managed to get past us, we'd be locked out, so I want to leave at least one trustworthy person in there at all times."

"And you chose Carten?" Rain asked, a grin spreading across his face.

"Oi!" Carten shouted from beyond the barrier. His voice was muffled but perfectly understandable. "Did'ya ferget I can hear ya from in 'ere?"

Rain's grin widened. "Nope."

Jamus chuckled. "Yes, we picked Carten. He's the only one besides Mahria who was comfortable with the heat."

Rain glanced over at Mahria, who was giggling at something Lyn had just said. *Yeah, Carten's the better pick. At least she's stopped bothering me now that she's got what she wanted.* He looked back at Jamus, then turned to Samson. "Right. I'm going in. Carten can help me clean up. Jamus, make sure nobody tries anything here. Samson, gather up the first group of winners and get them ready for their blue. Make sure they don't forget their rings."

"I'll see to it," Samson said.

"Shiny," Rain replied, lowering his visor and stepping through the wall of flames.