

114: March

An icy wind ruffled Rain's cloak as he passed through the barrier east of Fel Sadanis. He smiled and closed his eyes, breathing in the clean air as his boots crunched against the trampled snow. "Finally."

He turned back to look at the city one last time. The scene was hazy from the smoke, and the crumbling walls hid the growing foundations of the Watch's citadel from view. The land around the city was a mushroom swamp in full now, with the tallest specimens reaching over three meters in height. The heat had accelerated their growth. There were none to be seen outside the barrier.

It was tenth bell, and true to Rain's word, the company had moved out an hour ago. They were presently arrayed behind him, settling into formation for the journey. Rain had just needed to take care of a few last things in the city, but now all of that was done with. It would be a long time before he ever saw this place again, if ever. *I'll see you around, Bartum.*

He turned, walking across Ameliah's dirt bridge and past the gathered members of the company until he reached a sled that held some of the spare equipment. He selected a sword, which he belted at his waist, then a wooden shield and a spear, which he would carry with him as they marched.

The best way to learn was by doing, and the best way to lead was by example. He was in the same boat as the unawakened when it came to using these weapons. Samson's crash course on the sword and last night's formation drills were the sum total of his experience, not counting what he'd seen in movies. The rest would come down to practice. Anyway, carrying the weapons was less about the need for them and more about showing solidarity. He had a

heavy pack on his back over his cloak for much the same reason. That was in addition to his own messenger bag, slung at his side. Both were stuffed to bursting with supplies.

“Okay, everyone, just like we practiced,” Rain said, walking to the head of the group. He looked up at Tallheart, who was sitting atop the Forgewagon with Staavo riding shotgun. Dozer was in the bed, Rain could feel, happily asleep in his wooden crate.

Tallheart nodded and pushed the forgewagon’s levers forward. The vehicle jerked into motion. The smith pedaled slowly to keep the flywheel going, with Staavo providing token assistance. Tallheart was only letting the old man ride along in consideration for his missing foot and on the condition that he kept his mouth shut. Others would get turns as needed. Rain himself was planning on putting some pedal time in later. He felt a bit stiff, having skipped his morning workout in anticipation of all the walking they were going to be doing.

As a group, the company started moving, following the forgewagon as it crunched a path down the road. The snow wasn’t that deep, perhaps twenty centimeters at most, but it was significantly easier to just let the forgewagon’s treads do all the hard work. As part of the lead group, Rain didn’t have that luxury. He trudged through the snow beside the forgewagon, flanked by Tahir, the hunter. Finn and Ruce filled out the remainder of the lead party, paired up on the other side of the forgewagon.

The rest of the company stretched out behind them like a centipede, segmented in groups of three. Each group consisted of one person towing a medium-sized sled in the middle, plus a pair of armed guards, one on either side. The awakened and others with combat experience were spread across the groups such that the convoy’s defenses were relatively even down the line. The end of their little caravan was formed by Mlem and his self-powered journey cart, which did much better on the snow after it had been packed down by the sleds.

Everyone had packs to deal with, too, of course, even the guards. They were by no means traveling light. Progress was going to be slow, with frequent breaks until everyone got used to the physical demands of the loaded march. That was fine. Today's goal was only ten kilometers, after all. They could have done it in two hours, if not for the snow.

Depending on which map you looked at—because of course all the maps he'd been able to find blew—it was somewhere between thirty-five and fifty leagues to Vestvall by road. After unfucking the units, that came out to somewhere between one hundred seventy and two hundred fifty kilometers. It would take them a month at ten kilometers a day, which was way too damn long. Rain had no intention of moving that slowly.

The long-term goal that Rain had in mind for the company was a standard march of thirty kilometers a day. That pace would be grueling in these conditions, but Rain knew it was possible, especially if you threw magic into the mix. According to a fragment of memory from his high school world history class, thirty kilometers a day was the standard for the Roman military. Also, for what it was worth, Mlem agreed that such a pace was reasonable, even in these conditions. He said he'd traveled to and from Vestvall just before the barrier went up, taking less than a week in each direction.

Rule 23: You'll never get rich by being slow. Rain smiled. *Mlem is awakened, though, and he's got a magic cart. His perspective might be a bit off.*

If they *really* needed to move, stamina potions were on the table. With those, hitting or even exceeding Roman speed would be easy. Rain had acquired a small stockpile of them, and Myth and Reason even had a fresh batch fermenting in a glass jug somewhere. However, until monsters started dropping Crysts reliably, all types of potions were reserved for emergencies. Velocity, too, was an option, but that would require some practice for everyone to get used to. It would come later. For today, practice was more important than progress.

As much as getting to Vestvall quickly was important, it wasn't an *emergency*. Realistically, even doubling their pace wouldn't make that much difference to Jamus's family and the rest of the city's residents. Rescue was already *way* too late. The depth gauge was still waffling between ranks ten and eleven, and unless it dropped significantly by the time they got there, the odds of finding survivors wouldn't be high. Rain had gotten Officer Sells, the Watch's Diviner, to take a peek down the road for him, but Sells wasn't strong enough to see all the way to Vestvall. They'd be going in blind.

Rain shifted his grip on his shield, resisting the urge to add points to Strength to offset the weight of the equipment and his packs. No matter what he'd said in his little speech about not being able to turn back, he wanted to spend the first night relatively close to Fel Sadanis. It remained to be seen how problematic monster-spawns would be, and he wasn't planning to lead everyone to their deaths. If enough people wanted to go back after the first night, he wouldn't force them to continue.

Soon enough, the road exited the cleared land around Fel Sadanis, passing into the northern edge of Tallheart's forest. The trees would continue for some twenty kilometers, thinning somewhat, then transitioning to cleared plots of farmland as they approached the village of Essed. That was tomorrow's goal.

Rain was paying close attention to Detection as they walked. It was daytime, which meant that monsters would be generally more passive and wary of large groups, but it didn't mean the company wouldn't be attacked at all. If not for Ameliah, they probably would have already run into trouble.

Before ninth bell had even struck, Ameliah had gone out alone to scout and to sweep their path clear of any serious threats. She'd sent him a Message earlier, and from it, Rain knew that

she was planning on staying out there, ghosting around the group until they stopped for the day. Now and then, he would catch a glimpse of her through the trees. Those appearances were deliberate, designed to reassure the group. Her protection would only last for two hours, however. At that point, she was going to deliberately let a small group of monsters through.

Of course, Rain had elected to keep that little detail to himself.

In the fourth group from the head of the line, Lyn Aleuas Draves was finding that marching in heavy gear was significantly more taxing than she'd been expecting. As a noble, she'd never needed to work a day in her life, but that hardly meant she was a stranger to physical exertion. As her parents' youngest, and as their only daughter, she'd always felt like she had something to prove. That had led her to the arena. It was embarrassing for her, therefore, to be having trouble with something as simple as a march through the snow.

It had been almost two hours since they'd set out, and there was no indication that they were going to get another break anytime soon. They'd stopped once for a ten-minute breather, and then again for slightly longer when something had gone wrong with the ridiculous mechanical contraption they were following. When the next break would be, Lyn had no idea, and she wasn't about to make herself look weak by asking.

She glanced at the man toiling beside her, pulling the sled. Lyn had yet to speak with him at all, not being particularly happy with the group in which she'd been placed. She'd have preferred to be paired up with Lord Darr, or any of the other awakened. She didn't want to have to worry about two commoners when the excitement started.

She shook her head. *No, not commoners. Amateurs.*

Lyn had met many commoners in the arena, even losing matches to them occasionally. She was sure that these two were perfectly fine people. The *real* issue was that they weren't fighters.

They'd gotten past Mazel, at least. Now *there* was someone that Lyn was glad she'd never had to face on the beam.

Sighing, Lyn waved her spear to catch the attention of the man pulling the sled. *I might as well make an effort.*

He looked over, and she took a deep breath, then spoke, trying to hide how badly she was out of breath. "So since it looks like we're going to be stuck together for a while, I figured I should at least introduce myself. My name is Lyn Draves. What's yours?"

"Nails," the man said.

"What did you do, Nails, before joining Ascension?" She gestured at the convoy.

"Worked," Nails said.

Lyn hid her frown. *Not a big talker, this one.* "Doing what?"

Nails shrugged his shoulders, adjusting his grip on the sled's tow harness. "This sort of thing."

"So, you were a porter?"

"Sometimes."

There was a long pause. Just when Lyn was about to make another effort, the man spoke up of his own will. "You're a noble?"

Lyn tightened her grip on the spear. "I was. My family died in the Shift. Not the whole house, just my part of it." She looked away. "I'm the last one left."

"Sorry," Nails said.

"Yeah," Lyn said. When she spoke again, it was to change the subject. "So, what made you decide to join?"

"I was already working for Rain." Nails paused as if considering. "He's a good person."

Huh. "How long have you known him?" Lyn asked.

"Two weeks, maybe. What day is today?"

"Second of Winternight."

"Already?" Nails said. "I thought we were still in Frostfall."

"It's cold enough, either way," Lyn said. "I'm not looking forward to Fallow if we're still out here by then. This cloak isn't going to be enough, and the gambeson I got issued has a hole, though I shouldn't complain." *Fucking Shift.*

"Rain has a Heat aura," Nails said. "Delfina saw him use it."

"Mmm, I'd heard that," Lyn said, nodding. "Who's Delfina?"

Nails gestured to the third member of their party, a woman walking on the other side of the sled carrying a shield and spear just like her own.

"Oh," said Lyn, then she raised her voice. "Hello."

Delfina looked over, then quickly away the moment their eyes met. Lyn raised an eyebrow.

"She's quiet," Nails said by way of explanation.

"Wait, Nails, did I just hear you call someone quiet?" someone called from the group behind them. "What's that make her, mute?"

"Shut up, Faas," Nails said. "She talks. Just not to idiots like you."

"Oi!" Faas shouted. Lyn smiled.

"Look alive, everyone! On the right!" came a booming voice from the front of the caravan. Lyn jerked her head forward, seeing Rain perched unsteadily atop the forgewagon, pointing.

"We've got incoming! Full halt! Leave the sleds and get ready! Shields and spears in the front, archers in the back! Awakened, no magic!"

No magic? Lyn turned, shrugging out of her pack as she moved forward to join the others in mustering for battle. After a moment, Nails and Delfina appeared on either side of her. Nails had retrieved a shield and a spear from the sled. This wasn't the first monster attack that they'd had, but it was the first time an actual halt had been called. The previous incidents had both been rogue plague-rats, each one being quickly felled by arrows from a distance.

Lyn searched the trees, looking for the threat. Whatever it was, it was going to be big. "Does anyone see—there!" She pointed, seeing a flash of icy blue. She relaxed slightly, recognizing the monster. *Why call a halt for these?*

"Ice Slimes!" someone called from further down the line. Lyn could now see a few more of them coming through the trees.

"Use your shield," Lyn said, glancing at Delfina and Nails. "They'll jump when they get close. Shake them off, then when they fall, stab them before they jump again."

"Got it," said Nails.

Lyn gripped her spear tightly. *Okay, that is a lot of slimes, actually...*

More and more of them just kept filtering out of the trees, leaving tracks of hardened ice atop the snow. Arrows were already flying, claiming the first kills. Lyn cursed, staring at the oncoming monsters. She slipped her arm out of her shield's straps and dropped it to the ground, taking a two-handed grip on her weapon instead. The shield would have just slowed her down, even if it was a good idea for the others.

The first slimes reached them, launching themselves and kicking up puffs of snow. Lyn struck downward, using the spear more like a staff to swat the icy blob headed for her out of the air. Unsure if she'd killed it, she pulled back and stabbed. Her strike pierced the slime with no resistance, releasing a small wave of foul-smelling jelly as the point of the spear bit into the frozen ground beneath the snow. Cold rolled off the ooze, sharp against the exposed skin of her face.

Lyn looked up as she freed her spear from the earth. Beside her, Nails was fighting with a slime that had stuck itself to his shield, and Delfina was rushing to help him. Lyn would have gone to help as well, but there was another slime headed right for her.

Jumping back, she intercepted its leap with the haft of her spear, sending the blobby monster flying off to the side. She didn't chase after it. Instead, she lunged, stabbing yet another slime before it even got a chance to leave the ground.

Just as in the arena, time stretched into a blur. Deflect, dodge, stab, advance, dodge again. Her long hours of practice were paying off. A spear wasn't much different from a staff, not when it came down to it.

"Stumper!" Rain's voice called over the shouts of combat. "Unawakened, get away from it!" Lyn felt her blood run cold in a way that had nothing do with the icy snot she found herself spattered in.

"Mine!" someone shouted. There was a thunderous clang of metal on metal, but Lyn didn't have time to look for the source of the noise or identify the speaker. Wherever the Stumper was, it wasn't nearby, and there was a more immediate problem she needed to deal with.

"Geroff me!" Faas shouted, scrabbling behind himself, trying to reach the slime that was clinging to his cloak.

"Turn around and stay still!" Lyn shouted at him.

Amazingly, Faas had the presence of mind to comply, spinning and freezing in place. Wasting no time, Lyn slashed with the blade of the spear. Her precise strike sheared through the slime's membrane, killing it instantly and dumping its foul-smelling insides all down Faas's back.

"Depths, that's cold!" Faas shouted.

Lyn whirled, looking for more threats, but there were none. The last slimes were dying, being rapidly dealt with by the other fighters. The Stumper, she now saw, had come out of the trees near the tail of the caravan. It was already dead. The bearded turtle was stomping on its

corpse with an armored boot while Lord Darr and the orange-robed mage looked on. Jamus, she thought his name was.

"If you've got wounded, raise your hand!" Rain's voice rose over the chaos. Lyn spun to see him hurtling toward her. The nimbus of Purify surrounded him, and as he passed, the icy filth soaking Faas vanished as if it had never been. Lyn looked down, seeing that she had also been cleaned of the splattered evidence of the battle. She looked up, watching wordlessly as Rain tore down the line, luminescent mist trailing in his wake. *Where was he this whole time?*

Realization struck as Ameliah had exited the trees, looking utterly unconcerned by the scene. *Oh. I see.*

Lyn watched Rain for a moment more, becoming increasingly aware of the cold that filled the air as the excitement of the battle faded. The gambeson had protected her well, but she'd barely gotten any slime on her. Looking around at the others, she sighed, seeing more than a few pairs of chattering teeth belonging to those who hadn't been as quick to dodge. *I suppose we DO need the practice.*

Rain worked to slow his breathing as he made his way back along the column, passing the laughing and celebrating members of the company. Thirteen Tel sat in a pouch in his pocket, the spoils from their conquest. While there hadn't been any Cold Crysts, it was proof that monsters were starting to drop things again. When they stopped for the day, he'd break it up into copper and pay out everyone's shares.

People gave Rain appreciative looks as he passed, as he was running Immolate at a low level to take the edge off the chill. No one had been seriously hurt. There'd been a few minor cases of frostbite where slime had come into contact with exposed skin, but nothing that couldn't be treated with a tiny dab of healing potion. Frost Slimes weren't even corrosive, so even their wardrobes were unscathed. Nevertheless, Rain was going to have to talk to Ameliah about what constituted a *small* group of monsters. When he'd sensed the multitude of slimes coming, he'd thought there'd been some mistake. Ameliah's arrival soon after told him it wasn't. No, this had been precisely what she'd intended. The Stumper, too. That had been a test for the awakened, or perhaps for him.

Rain frowned as he watched Ameliah disappear back into the trees, off to resume her scouting, no doubt. He shook his head with a sigh. *Everything worked out fine, I guess. Maybe she's got a better estimate of how much we can handle than I do. They're going to need to learn to protect themselves; it's just... Holding back when someone might get hurt is hard.*

Rain made his way toward the forgewagon, planning to take a shift on pedal-duty now that Staavo had wandered off toward the back of the caravan. The old scholar had said he wanted to talk to Jamus and walk a while, so the seat was free. As he approached, he dropped Immolate, knowing that the magic would have just been sucked up by the vehicle's metallic frame.

Metal had a sort-of gravity well when it came to magic; the higher the mana conversion rate, the stronger the pull. If you launched a Firebolt at a warrior, they'd be able to block it with a sword if they managed to get the blade within, say, five centimeters of the bolt. The required distance depended on the strength of the spell, its type, as well as the specific metal that the sword was made from.

For example, the Dark Revenant's Armor that he was wearing was made of Dark Steel with a ninety-nine percent mana conversion. That meant that for every hundred points of magical damage, only one point would impact the durability, with the rest being converted to mana and absorbed. For non-damaging spells, it was much the same, except the numbers were harder to quantify. A debuff like Malaise would get cut down to one percent of its effectiveness. The rest of the energy would be converted to mana and absorbed, but that was where things started getting squirrely. It wasn't the original mana cost of the spell. It was some sort of a damage-equivalent based on spell-efficiency or something.

Of course, all of this became even more complicated when souls got involved—order of effect, perception of the target, intent of the caster, and so forth. In the case of the forgewagon, though, it was simple. Trying to use magic near that much metal was like trying to roll a ball-bearing past a powerful magnet. At low power, even something omnidirectional like an aura couldn't avoid getting sucked in. Boosting the spell high enough for some of the magic to break free simply wasn't worth the effort, let alone pushing hard enough to actually saturate the metal.

As with his armor, the effect wasn't able to override Rain's own domain. It still messed with the mana, but couldn't absorb it. When seated on the forgewagon, Winter worked just fine as a singularity, and at the kind of power-levels he always ran it at, it was capable of reaching the person sitting in the other seat.

Detection also worked. That particular spell didn't seem to care about the presence of the metal whatsoever. It wasn't even the 'not occluded by mundane materials' effect listed on the skill card. According to Ameliah, metal should have overridden that. She'd said instead that it was because Detection was a Divination-aspect spell.

Whatever the reason, it tracked with Rain's own experience. He'd been able to use Detection to find ores back in the mine and to see straight through the metal box Rankin had been using to hide his stash. Shielding something against Divination took a bit more effort than just lining the walls of your secret base with lead, apparently.

Likewise, some skills were explicitly meant to work with metal. Case in point, Tallheart, who was standing at his anvil, tapping lightly with his hammer. Rain couldn't see what he was working on from this angle.

"Hey Tallheart, what did I miss?" Rain asked, gesturing.

"Nothing," Tallheart said. "Please do something about this." He pointed to his feet, where Dozer was clinging to his leg.

Rain smiled. *Dozer, down*, he commanded. The slime obediently released Tallheart's leg and dropped to the snow. The moment it hit the ground, it quivered in shock. Feelings of distress and betrayal came across the link, but that might have just been Rain projecting. Dozer didn't like snow, or the cold in general. Rain hurriedly walked around the forgewagon to stow his shield and spear in the small gap behind the seats, then bent down and grabbed the slime, cradling it in his arms like a giant water balloon. Dozer jiggled contentedly against his chest, snuggling as only an amorphous blob could.

"Don't get used to it, Dozer. You're too big for this. You're going to have to learn to deal with the snow."

This was met with nothing but happy confusion.

Rain sighed, stroking the slime idly as he peered up at what Tallheart was working on. "What are you making?"

Tallheart held up a cylindrical piece of metal. He turned it, showing Rain that it was hollow. "A cylinder for your damping idea. I am growing tired of the bouncing. Mmm. And the noise."

"Oh, cool," Rain said. "I'm not sure what we can do about the noise, though. The links for the treads need to be loose enough to accommodate the suspension, hence all the clanking."

"I will make a muffler, now that we are away from the city."

"A what?" Rain asked.

"A muffler," Tallheart said. "I will need...hmm...two Arcane Crysts."

"Oh, a Muffler. Like Muffle the spell?" *It's worth it, I guess. We've only got seven Arcane Crysts, though...*

Tallheart rumbled in confirmation. "Yes." He jumped down from the bed, then tucked the unfinished cylinder into a crate lashed below the anvil that held a few other metal bits and bobs. "I will finish tonight. We should keep moving."

Rain nodded. "I'll pedal with you for a bit. I've got something I wanted to talk to you about, anyway."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "We are still stopping early for the night?"

"Yeah," Rain said. "Hang on, let me check the odometer."

The odometer was a work in progress, and Rain's answer to crappy cartography. At the moment, it wasn't mounted anywhere convenient where it could be read while in motion. They'd bolted it beneath the bed near the back-left axle. It wasn't anything complicated, just a bulky frame holding a series of wooden wheels and belts. Properly, it should have been done with gears, but making all those tiny teeth would have been too time-consuming given their schedule.

The forgewagon's wheels had a radius of exactly 35cm. The treads added another three centimeters to that, bringing the total radius up to 38cm. Perimeter being $2\pi r$, that turned into 238.761cm traveled for each wheel rotation. As one of the axles directly drove the odometer, the first wooden wheel in the box would turn at the same rate. The 10:1 reduction to the next wheel meant a revolution there corresponded to 2.38m, then 23.8m for the one after that, and so on. Tweaking the ratio of the first reduction to get things into increments of ten would have been nice, but it added complexity. He hadn't even built the thing, only scribbled some quick requirements down and outsourced the design to a carpenter back in Fel Sadanis.

Simple as it was, it functioned amazingly well. Rain had even calibrated it by using Purify's range as a measuring stick. Multiplying the reading by 1.033 compensated for the measurement errors, at least up to the fourth wheel.

Rain deposited Dozer in the forgewagon's bed, then bent to inspect the odometer. He lifted his visor to get a better look at the notches carved into the wheels, then quickly tallied up the distance and applied the correction factor. He didn't even bother to summon his calculator for something so trivial. "Five point nine kilometers," he said, straightening.

Tallheart frowned. "What is that in leagues?"

"Not my problem," Rain said. "We're using metric, end of story."

Tallheart snorted, and Rain glared at him. "It's an objectively superior system, just like the numbers I use. I'm going to teach both systems to everyone, and you all will thank me for it when I'm done."

Tallheart rumbled, unconvinced.

Rain shook his head. *He'll come around. Also, Dozer, how are you already asleep?*

The slime had oozed into the box of parts, slurping up the unfinished pieces and relaxing bonelessly into the shape of the container. In point of fact, the crate had actually been Dozer's bed *first*. Tallheart had started using it for storage later. Fortunately, neither of them seemed to mind sharing.

Rain snorted as a wave of sleepy contentment buffeted him. He pushed it aside, motioning to Tallheart. "Come on, let's go. Just four kilometers left. It shouldn't take us long." He turned, facing the rest of the company. "Form up!" he roared. "We're moving!"

After clambering up into the passenger's seat, Rain settled his feet on the pedals and fastened his seatbelt. Next, he accessed the Ring's interface and buffed Strength up to his limit of forty-

seven, taking the points from Clarity. With the point of sync that he'd gotten late last night, that put him at sixteen effective, a dangerous number as far as his coordination was concerned. Boosted like this, he needed to be exceedingly careful with rapid movements. He wouldn't want to, say, deck himself in the teeth with a metal gauntlet during an attempt to scratch his nose. *Nope. Nothing like that has ever happened. Not to me, no sir.*

Rain began to push against the pedals, but they didn't even budge. Tallheart had adjusted the gear ratio yesterday, not wanting to have to pedal so quickly to maintain a walking pace. Rain clenched his teeth and pushed harder. Slowly, the pedals began to turn. He smiled, pushing harder still, using the seat for leverage.

Suddenly, something clicked, and there was a sharp pain in his left knee that made him stop in surprise. *Did...did I just break my leg?*

"Um, Tallheart," Rain said, slowly raising his knee. There was another pop as something clicked back into place, accompanied by a second spike of pain. Rain's eye twitched slightly as the sharp sensation faded into a dull, throbbing ache. He looked over at Tallheart. "At what point do I need to start worrying about having too much Strength?"

"Hmm," Tallheart said, fiddling with his seatbelt. "It starts to become dangerous at ten to one with Endurance. Recovery only matters after the damage is done." He looked up, alarm flickering across his face when he saw Rain cradling his knee. "Was that noise you? What happened?"

"I think I dislocated my knee a little bit, or maybe my kneecap. I didn't even think that was possible. It popped back in, but yeah, not pleasant."

"Are you sure?" Tallheart asked, peering at Rain's leg, then back at his face. "You do not seem to be in distress."

"Yeah, pretty sure," Rain said, flexing the joint slowly. Everything seemed to be working, but his body was screaming at him to stop. Instead, he straightened his leg and consulted his menus. "I'm only at a five-to-one ratio with Endurance, so why—?" He blinked. "Oh. That would do it."

Dropping his Strength to fifteen, Rain healed his knee in a puff of overhealth, then brought his Strength back up to thirty and dumped the remaining balance in Endurance. He looked over at Tallheart, who was watching him with concern. "I wasn't at max health. I guess my ligaments couldn't take it?" He pitched his voice up, making it a question.

Tallheart frowned. "Perhaps."

Rain nodded. *That's it, resting buff of ten for Endurance from now on. That was NOT pleasant.*

"Okay, let's go." He started pushing again, pulling the rest of his points out of Clarity and spreading them between Endurance and Strength, not exceeding a two-to-one ratio.

"Are you well, Rain?" Tallheart asked, watching him.

"Fine," Rain said. "Already healed." *Damn, this flywheel is heavy. Turn, damn you!*

"That is not what I mean," Tallheart said. The pedals started turning effortlessly as the smith added his strength to Rain's. "You have not been sleeping enough. You are pushing yourself too hard."

"I'm—" Rain cut himself off. He was going to say fine again, but that really wasn't true, and he knew it. He kept pedaling, matching Tallheart's speed. He glanced to the side at Tahir and Finn, who were chatting nearby. He cleared his throat and called out to them. "Tahir, Finn, go find out where Ruce wandered off to, then all of you fall back to the first sled. Tallheart and I are going to take the forgewagon ahead for a little bit so we can have a private conversation. Keep an eye on us, but don't let anyone eavesdrop, okay?"

"Sure thing, boss," Finn said, slapping Tahir on the shoulder. The two of them retreated, and Tallheart pushed the controls forward. Rain twisted himself around to look over his shoulder as the forgewagon lurched into motion, then waved to Vanna to get everyone to follow.

Vanna nodded, then turned and shouted at the company, "Move out!"

Rain gave her a thumbs up before turning back to face the road. He and Tallheart pedaled silently for a few minutes as Rain waited for them to build up a little distance.

"It's the memories," he finally said. "Being a Dynamo just makes it worse. They're there every time I close my eyes." He looked down. "Keeping myself busy...helps."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled. "I understand."

Rain nodded. "Yeah."

He closed his eyes. He didn't really feel like saying any more. Instead, he focused on the pumping of his legs. There wasn't even a specter of the pain from his knee, and his body felt strong.

Amazingly strong. *Unnaturally* strong.

"I'll be okay," Rain said after a minute. "It's...going to take me some time. Just let me know if it looks like I'm getting worse. Don't let me pull away. I did that after my parents died, and—" He shook his head. "You don't want to hear this. Thank you, Tallheart."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "It is good that you are aware of your own state. Ameliah was concerned that you did not even realize how you were behaving."

Rain looked up. "Really? What did she tell you?"

Tallheart snorted but didn't answer.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rain asked. "Come on, what did she say?"

Tallheart stopped pedaling, startling Rain with the sudden increase in resistance. "Stop," Tallheart said. "We are moving too quickly."

Rain glanced over his shoulder, then blinked when he saw how far back the next group was. Vanna was glaring at him, an annoyed expression on her face as she struggled to keep up while towing the sled behind her.

Oops. Rain eased off, the pedals coming to a complete stop as the momentum of the flywheel carried them forward.

"This vehicle is impressive for something unenchanted," Tallheart said. "The *cars* of your world move faster still, correct?"

"Much faster," Rain said, shaking his head and grudgingly accepting the change of subject. *I'll talk to Ameliah later. Make sure she knows I'm okay.* "Ten times faster or more, and you don't need to pedal them. And planes go like ten times faster than that. Some planes even break the sound barrier. Don't even get me started on rockets."

Tallheart rumbled in what Rain interpreted as acceptance.

"We'll get there," Rain said, slapping the side of his chair for lack of a door. "And beyond. My world had technology; this world has magic. Together, that's *magiteck*, and it is going to be awesome. I'm talking Airships, Tallheart. Airships!"

"Mmm."

Rain continued on, heedless of what was *probably* skepticism. "Those Majistraal teleporters are holding up progress, I tell you. They make getting around too easy. Nobody's even tried to make anything better than journey carts. They haven't needed to."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, thoughtfully this time. He had started pedaling again, slowly.

"We need to be careful about it, though," Rain said, matching his pace. "There's some stuff that I know that's better left unmentioned. Hell, even if someone finds out that it's *possible*, we could be in trouble. Who knows how many steps they could skip with magic."

Rain tilted his head. *Could Tallheart build a filter for U235?* An image of a mushroom cloud flashed through his mind, and he shuddered. Hurriedly pushing the thought away, he asked a follow-up question. "Say, Tallheart, how many Ment-Crysts would you need to make something to block a mind reader?"

Tallheart scratched at one of his antlers, taking a moment to consider the question. "Anyone strong enough to read thoughts is too strong for an enchantment born of Crysts to be more than an inconvenience," he finally said. "It would take a GranCryst, at minimum."

Rain frowned. "And what about someone like Warden Vatrece?"

Tallheart snorted. "Impossible."

"Care to elaborate?" Rain asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Platinums are..." Tallheart said, trailing off. He closed his eyes, and when he spoke again, there was a note of pain in his voice. "There is no resistance. I was a fool for ever believing differently."

Rain winced. *Shit*. He cleared his throat, interested in moving the conversation along before Tallheart spiraled down a dark path. "Anyway, Tallheart, there's another reason I wanted to talk to you alone. I've got a question for you." He hesitated. "It's kind of related. Sorry."

Tallheart shook his head, then snorted. "Ask."

Rain nodded. "Right, well..."

"Just ask," Tallheart said.

"I wanted to talk to you about equipment," Rain said with a sigh. "Weapons and armor. I know you're not comfortable making that kind of stuff for humans, but... I wanted to know if you'd consider it. Just for the company, of course."

Tallheart frowned.

Rain held up his hands hurriedly. "I'm not going to push you on it; I just wanted to see where you stood. I'm not even sure it is a good idea, given all the shit crafters have to deal with. I don't exactly want word to spread about what you can do. Still, imagine what this company would be like if we all had full plate armor. Even without enchantments, I know you can make way better gear than the crap I bought." Rain gestured to the sword on his hip, indicating the specks of rust on the pommel.

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled noncommittally. After a few seconds of silence, he spoke again.

"You, Ameliah, and Jamus are the only humans I trust."

"To be clear, that's a no, right?"

Tallheart just looked at him. Rain sighed, rubbing at his eyes. *Damn it, I fucked this all up. Stupid, Rain, stupid.* "Fair enough," he said after a moment. "I won't ask again. I said I wouldn't push, and I won't."

Tallheart nodded.

The two of them pedaled in silence for a few minutes. Tallheart stared into the distance, his thoughts remaining inscrutable as Rain pored over the conversation, trying to determine how he could have approached things differently. Suddenly, a thought struck him, and he tilted his head. "What about Staavo?"

Tallheart looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

"You didn't include him in your list of trusted humans," Rain elaborated. "You made some wire and stuff for him, though, and you let him ride up here."

Tallheart snorted. "I trust Staavo to be Staavo." He looked at Rain, face expressionless. "Noisy, but harmless."

"Oof," Rain said.

"Do not tell him I said that," Tallheart said, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "He is...not bad. For a human. Loud, pushy, and rude, but not bad." Tallheart paused, tilting his head. "Do not tell him that I said that either."

Rain laughed, a small fraction of his tension draining away. "Sure thing, Tallheart."