

111: Pickup

Kettel scowled after the retreating noble. "What an asshole. Thinks he's so fancy with his stupid gold trim."

Jaks laughed. "A noble like him doesn't need money, not like us starving bronzes. Makes sense he wouldn't be interested since he said he doesn't need the experience either. Shouldn't have gotten your hopes up, pup."

"Don't call me pup!" Kettel snapped, glaring at the scarred man.

"I'll call you what you are, pup," Jaks grinned, running a bare hand along the edge of the axe he'd been sharpening. "If you don't like it, do something about it."

Kettel cringed as the blood from the wound flowed unnaturally to coat the jagged blade in a layer of red. Jaks licked his palm, blood staining his chin, then slipped the axe back through a loop in his belt and drew another one of the same type from his opposite hip.

"Oh, please do," said Mahria from where she was seated on a barrel, staff across her knees as she kicked her feet. "I'm getting bored."

"No fighting," said Stoneshield, "Save your mana for the monsters." Stoneshield was a bronzeplate warrior of the traditional variety, using both a sword and a shield. He liked telling people what to do, for all that nobody wanted him as a leader. Also, his shield wasn't even made of stone. *Why call yourself Stoneshield if yer shield's made o' wood, dumbshit?*

"Quiet, *dad*," Mahria said.

Kettel snorted and looked away. *Jaks ain't worth me time. He's jus' tryin' to get me goat, an' Stoneshield might be a bossy git, but he's right. There're monsters tha' need burnin' more'n some asshole blood mage axe murderer or whatever tha depths Jaks is supposed to be.*

"Can we just go already?" said Elmwood. "We'll be fine with six." Elmwood was a Nature Mage, and he was clearly taking pains to look the part. His youthful face bore an unkempt old-man beard, and he had hair that a bird would have been happy to call home. He'd described himself as a utility caster, and supposedly, he could summon a tree spirit, though he was refusing to demonstrate.

"And what happens when you're out of mana, Bushface?" said Mindyblades. She was their final member, a dual-wielder like Jaks, obvious from her name even if you missed the pair of shortswords strapped to her hips. She was also the closest to his own age, a year or two older, at most.

"It will be fine, Mindy," said Elmwood. "And don't call me Bushface."

"*Mindyblades,*" she corrected him. "I'll stop calling you Bushface when you get it right. Or shave."

"Damn it, fine," said Stoneshield. He muttered something under his breath, then continued in a louder voice. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. Jaks and I are the battle line, plus the ent if we need it to turtle for us. Elmwood, Kettel, and Mahria are in the back throwing spells, and Mindyblades is in charge of making sure nothing sneaks around and guts them. Everyone fine with that?"

Kettel shrugged. It sounded reasonable. The man *did* have more experience than he did with this kind of thing, and just going with his plan was easier than trying to propose one of his own. This was only Kettel's second experience in a party, after all. *I jus' wish Rain weren't famous. He'd be a better leader than this bossy git, but the Watch would never let 'em go out alone. They'd come with 'em, and then they'd claim all our loot. Six-way split is bad enough.*

"Good," Stoneshield said. "Now, I propose we start at the Guild square."

"There's nothing left there," said Jaks. "I should know." He juggled his axe into his elbow and raised his hands, showing them the rings adorning his bloody fingers. "Raided the Havenheid outfitter myself."

Mahria snorted. "And you went for statrings? Really?"

"Piss off," Jaks said. "I ain't got much mana, and I'm bloody broke. You think I can afford to keep fancy equipment charged? Plus, I wasn't the only one, and I wasn't goin' to start a fight over something I don't need."

"I've got an idea," Kettel said, interrupting Mahria's reply.

"Oh, cute," said Mindyblades. "The pup's got an idea."

"Stuff yer' hole," Kettel said, not even looking at her. It was Stoneshield that he needed to convince. "So ye know the Night Cleaner, right? I was talkin' to 'im a few days ago—we're friends, him an' me—an' he said tha he thinks Rankin's been steelin' Tel an' shit from tha Guild. Said he thinks he's been stashin' it somewhere. I'm thinkin' we find his house and see if Rain were right."

"I'd believe it," said Elmwood. "Rankin's an ass. Halgrave was much better at the job."

"Mmm," Mahria said, as if unconvinced. Kettel looked at her, raising an eyebrow. *Ain't Halgrave her da? She got some problem with 'im?*

"And I know where Rankin's house is, I think," said Mindyblades. "It's not that far from the Guild. We can start at the Guild square to make sure that it's really been picked over, then head there next."

"Sounds good," Mahria said, hopping off the barrel and thumping her staff against it loudly. She gestured to Stoneshield. "Let's go. After you, old man."

"Who are you calling old?" said Stoneshield. "I'm twenty-four. How old are you?"

"None of your gods-damned business," Mahria said.

"Older, then," Jaks said, laughing. "Sure don't act like it."

The group moved cautiously down the street that led to the Guild square, weaving around the occasional chest-high mushroom that had erupted through the crumbling cobblestones. It was daytime, and they had yet to run into any resistance, the monsters preferring to stay within the ruins of houses and shops rather than roam the streets. They were still within sight of the barricade, in fact. The Watch had let them through grudgingly, warning them that they were going to be on their own and insisting that they not cross the river. That was a request that they planned on ignoring, as their second destination was on the other side.

Kettel was reviewing everything he knew about awakened combat as they walked. In addition to his own experience, he'd picked up a few snippets at the Guild, as well as endured Rain's monologue on skill selection. On a mission like this, mages like him were the reserve. They were only supposed to use their magic to attack if it looked like the warriors would be overwhelmed. It all came down to efficiency. It only took like a point of stamina to swing a sword dozens of times, but a single Firebolt cost ten mana. Once a mage had exhausted their reserves, they were done, usually for at least a day unless you were some sort of mana freak like Rain.

In Kettel's case, with only two spells and no metamagic, the math wasn't unapproachable. It was just adding and counting. All you had to do was start with the cost of the spell, then keep adding it to itself until you got to your maximum mana, counting how many times it took. That got you how many times you could cast the spell. Both of his abilities needed ten mana per cast, and he had eight hundred mana, so that was eighty shots. He was pretty sure that he had that right, even though he'd never tested it.

In practice, the headache got so bad that he had to stop well before he got to that point. He'd been resting for the past three days to let his pool refill, and he was actually at full for the first time since he'd cast his very first Firebolt. He could have recovered all of that mana in a single

night, probably, if he'd been willing to subject himself to Rain's aura. He shivered. It's *jus'* so *damn unsettlin', bein' cold without bein' cold.*

He knew he'd have to get used to it eventually if he was going to travel with Rain, but he just couldn't see the point to regaining mana that fast. Twenty shots in a row left him feeling like he wanted to die. Spreading it out over a day helped, which he hoped he'd be able to do here. Worst case, he still had eighty shots. A headache wasn't going to stop him from throwing fire if he needed it to save his life. He'd do his best to conserve his mana nevertheless—after he got the first kill, of course.

Kettel glanced at Mahria. *I wonder how many shots she's got? Probably no more'n me. Rumor is she ain't got no class neither.* He shifted his gaze to Elmwood. *This guy, though, no idea. What's a Nature Mage even do?*

"Movement ahead," Stoneshield said. "Just a slime."

"Mine!" shouted Mahria. There was a blue flash, then a spike of ice flew over Stoneshield's shoulder. It struck one of the slimes, piercing straight through it and smashing into the ground on the other side with a sound like shattering glass. A bell chimed in Kettel's head, accompanied by burning words.

Your group has defeated [Slime]
Contribution: 1 in 100
Experience: None

"Yeah, perfect shot!" Mahria shouted. She had her staff in a two-handed grip over her shoulder, one end pointing at the unfortunate slime. "First kill."

Kettel frowned. *Damn it, she beat me to it. Does tha' staff help her aim or somethin'? Should I get me one?* He returned his attention to the burning message. *Contribution one in one hundred? Fer what? Moral support?*

There were two more flashes in rapid succession, and two more slimes met their ends, pierced in the exact same manner.

"It's just slimes. Save your mana, idiot," said Jaks.

"Ugh, foul things," Stoneshield said. He raised his sword and advanced, shield leading.

"I could summon my ent," said Elmwood.

"Save that too," said Jaks. "We aren't gonna get very far if we're afraid of a little mess."

Kettel watched as Stoneshield and Jaks tore into the slimes. There were only four left, and it was over in seconds. The only damage taken by the party was to their noses. *Me contribution's still one in one hundred fer all of 'em, even though I did fuck all. Why's tha'?*

"We're not gonna try sifting through them, are we?" Elmwood asked, following after the warriors. Kettel joined him, deliberately walking around the spreading ooze. The slime's acid would still be active, and he wasn't about to ruin his boots. They were new.

"Forget it," said Stoneshield. "Not worth the effort, and I hear these things aren't dropping Tel anyway. Besides, I left my colander at home."

Kettel laughed. "That ain't a bad idea, actually. Beats how I used ta do it."

"How'd you used to do it?" asked Mindyblades.

"Greased meself up and jus' went at 'em starkers."

"What?" said Mahria. Her head whipped around as she turned it to stare at him, revulsion and disbelief warring on her face. "Tell me you're kidding."

"I ain't!" Kettel said, laughing at her reaction. *Fancy girl like 'er's prolly never been dirty a day in 'er life.* "Trick is in keepin' yer mouth shut. Made tha' mistake before."

"You're serious?" said Elmwood. Kettel grinned at him. "By the gods. You *are* serious." Elmwood looked queasy as he stared at Kettel. "You're insane."

Jaks laughed. "The pup's got the right of it. I've had my clothes burned off me more times than I can count. Acid, fire, shit, whatever, it's all the same. Skin you can wash; clothes, you just replace when you're done. Now come on, I ain't got all day."

Mahria sniffed. She deliberately strode straight through the remains of the slimes, her boots making unpleasant squelching noises as the hem of her blue robe dragged through the ooze. "Or you get a basic Chem-resist treatment from an alchemist. Honestly, I think some of you *like* being completely filthy."

"If you're hunting slimes for Tel, you can't afford something like that," said Mindyblades. "Not everyone's got a mother like yours to get them started. I remember when I—Hey! You splashed me!"

"Don't fucking talk about my mother," Mahria said coldly, lowering her boot after having sent a glob of slime her way.

"Enough," said Stoneshield. "We're moving. Come on."

"But my cloak is—"

"Just stop bloody talking, all of you," said Jaks. "About anyone's mother, your laundry, the weather, or whatever. We're here to kill things and loot shit. This isn't a morning stroll."

"Well, we have a problem," Stoneshield said, darting out of the Guildhall and back into the square. "It doesn't want to come out. We're going to have to fight it in there if we want to go in."

"Damn," said Jaks. "That's just what I had planned for today when I woke up this morning. Getting crushed by a building."

"I vote Kettel sets the whole thing on fire," said Mindyblades.

Kettel grinned. "I could do, sure, but then we'd have ta wait fer it ta burn out." He tapped his forehead. "Ya gotta think these things through. The point's ta see if there's anythin' worth takin' in there."

"Guild pays in Tel," said Elmwood. "That means they've got to keep plenty on hand. I vote we go for it."

"Someone already would have cleared out the money chest," said Stoneshield. "Probably Rankin or one of the clerks. I know Rankin's already got the ledgers. He wouldn't have taken those and left the cash."

"I could use the experience, either way," Stoneshield said. "A Stumper is worth sixteen fifty. Even split six ways, that's worth the effort. The things are slow and easy to kill. Greater monster, my ass."

"I'm not fighting a Stumper inside a building," said Mindyblades. "Getting crushed by a falling roof might be on Jaks's list for today, but it's not on mine."

"You need to actually hit it if you want it to follow you into the light," Mahria said. "If you hurt it, it will come out. Trust me. I've done this before. Here, move."

She stood facing the open door to the guild's dim interior, then raised her hand. "Everyone ready?" she asked. She didn't even look back before she launched a spike of ice. There was a soft thwump of impact, then a deep roar as Mahria calmly but quickly backpedaled from the entrance. Kettel grinned and raised his hands as the front of the Guild exploded. The gigantic mushroom man had smashed through the wall rather than try and squeeze through the door. *Time ta burn, ye idiot mushroom! Jus' gotta wait fer me chance.*

"Shit, behind!" Mindyblades shouted.

Kettel whirled to see a pack of gigantic rats flowing out of an alleyway. They were headed straight for them. Burning text above their health bars labeled them as Venomfang Plague Rats. They were significantly smaller than the Trundlers that Kettel had fought in the Fells, but they looked quite a bit faster. It was clear that they'd heard the Stumper's roar and rushed out to investigate. *Tha' or me luck is jus' tha' fuckin' bad.*

He shouted, launching a Firebolt at the lead rat. It would have missed, had not the rat's attempted dodge actually brought it into the missile's path. It screeched as its fur caught fire, and the other rats hesitated long enough for Jaks to plant himself between the mages and the oncoming swarm.

"Don't get bit," he said, then charged.

"A little help over here!" shouted Stoneshield. The Stumper roared in pain and anger, and a blast of cold wind told him that Mahria was responsible, though most of Kettel's attention was on the rats so he couldn't pay attention to what she was doing.

"Roots! Ten seconds!" Elmwood shouted.

Kettel blinked as the cobblestones beneath the rats erupted with grasping vines, clinging to anything and everything above the ground, Jaks included.

"Damn it," Jaks said, struggling against the vines with a rat hanging off his forearm where it had sunk its teeth. He hacked into its back with his axe, severing its spine, then tossed the head away.

Your group has defeated [Venomfang Plague Rat]
Contribution: 1 in 100
Experience: 1

Shit, what am I doin'? Kettel swore, then took careful aim and shot a Firebolt at another of the entangled rats. It hit with a puff of flame, igniting the rat's fur, but not killing it. *Damn it! I need fuckin' metamagic!* He fired again, then once more. The third shot did the trick.

Your group has defeated [Venomfang Plague Rat]
Contribution: 3 in 4
Experience: 112

Jaks roared, breaking free of the vines, which were starting to dry and crumble. He took advantage of the still bound rats, slashing at them mercilessly. A random javelin took one in the neck, killing it instantly.

What the hells?

Kettel looked around and spotted Elmwood, and what he saw was so distracting that he forgot about the rats for a moment. Spears were erupting from the ground surrounding the

Nature Mage. It took him a moment to realize that they were actually trees, growing rapidly as if they were being pushed up through the cobblestones. As Kettel watched, Elmwood pulled one from the ground and hurled it, its leaves falling away and turning brown as it flew toward the monsters.

"Damn it!" Stoneshield roared. There was a mighty thud of impact as the Stumper's fist crashed into his shield, driving him back. Mindyblades took the opportunity to carve an X into its back, and only then did Kettel realize she was no longer with them. The Stumper's health was already at half, and another chunk of its bar vanished as a shard of ice struck it in the cap. *Depths, that's way stronger than me Firebolts.*

"Fucking pay attention!" Elmwood shouted at Kettel, pointing at the rats.

Kettel jumped. *Damn it!* He'd only looked away for a moment, but Elmwood was right. He turned back just in time to see a rat lunging for his leg.

Instinctively, he used Flamestrike. Feet counted as melee weapons as far as the spell was concerned, and his fiery kick sent the rat flying. He sent a Firebolt after it for good measure, but it missed horribly.

"Someone get 'em off me!" Jaks shouted. He had three rats latched onto him, one on each leg and another hanging from the back of his shirt. He killed one with a strike from his axe, but another rushed in to replace it.

Short of launching a Firebolt at him, there wasn't much Kettel could do to fulfill Jaks's request, especially since he was busy with his own problems. The first rat that he'd torched had finally managed to put itself out and was coming for him, angry and burned, its health at half. Kettel fired another shot at it but missed. *Damn it!* He stomped at it with Flame Strike, but the rat

skittered out of the way of his boot. It took advantage of his unbalance and leapt at him, sinking its teeth deep into his arm. Its sharp fangs plunged straight through his shirt as if the tough canvas wasn't even there.

His shout had come more from surprise than pain, though it definitely didn't feel great having teeth scraping against the bones of your forearm. Kettel slammed a flaming fist into the rat's skull, killing it in an explosion that probably did just as much damage to him as it had to the rat. He dropped to the ground, rolling to extinguish the fire before it could burn through his shirt.

By the time he managed to put it out, the battle was over, the system's chime announcing the Stumper's death. Kettel had no idea who'd killed it, nor did he care. The pain from his arm was growing worse and worse, the heat from the bite rapidly eclipsing that of his own flames.

Shit, venom! It's in tha name.

Kettel tore at his sleeve, then raised his arm to his mouth, sucking at the wound. His blood tasted sharply metallic, with a foreign tang of acid that must have been from the rat's bite. He spat, then placed his lips on the second puncture as he glanced at his health. It was dropping slowly, the green bar in his vision still mostly full. He spat again. Suddenly, the pain from his arm lessened, the fire receding to a dull, smoldering ache as his health bar stopped dropping.

Fuckin' hells! What's tha' about?

"I said don't get bit, pup," said Jaks. Kettel looked up to see the scarred man grinning down at him. His scarred face was a ruin of shredded skin and blood. "I'm the only one who's allowed to get bit." He offered him a bloody hand attached to an arm that looked like it had been through a meat grinder. "Come on, walk it off."

Several hours later, Kettel cursed as a piece of broken glass sliced his hand. He was using a rag to mop up a spilled potion, the glass bottle having shattered when it had struck the ground. He lifted the sopping-wet rag, the white cloth stained green with potion and with a smear of red near his thumb. He stared at his blood numbly, his head pounding from mana overuse.

"Hurry," said Elmwood, his voice cracking with panic.

Kettel snapped out of it. He got to his feet and hurried over. Elmwood took the rag, then maneuvered it over Stoneshield's mouth, wringing out the liquid. Stoneshield spluttered, then gulped it down.

"Gah, tastes like shit," he said, then spat a bloody glob onto the ground. "And I could have done without the glass."

"Is it gonna work?" Kettel asked, looking at Stoneshield's twisted leg. The bone was sticking through the skin, and Kettel once more had to look away. They'd moved on from the Guild square, crossed the river, and had actually been making good progress until they'd tried taking on a trio of Stumpers at once. They'd felled one of them, but then Mindyblades and Jaks had gotten dosed with a lungful of spores. Stoneshield had gotten cornered while protecting them, which ended up with the Stumper smashing him through a house.

"It should," Mahria said. "The potion hasn't been exposed to the air for that long."

"We should have brought a healer," Elmwood said for the fifth time.

"Depths, this hurts!" growled Stoneshield. "Straighten out my damn leg. The potion's trying to—ah wait, it's gonna do it on its ow—FUCK!"

There was a sickening cracking sound as Stoneshield's knee snapped back into place. Kettel's stomach tried to revolt, but it was Elmwood that vomited. Kettel looked away, fighting to avoid joining him.

"Well, I can't say I've seen THAT happen before," Mahria said. She sounded curious, not even slightly disturbed by the sight of blood, in contrast to how she'd reacted to Kettel's slime-fighting technique.

"Mahria," Stoneshield wheezed. "Check on Jaks. Kettel, help Mindy."

"Mindyblades," came a weak rasp, followed by a hacking cough. Kettel had gotten back to his feet, but Mindyblades raised a hand, waving him away. "I'm...okay. Breathing hurts, but I'm—" She stopped, consumed by another fit of coughing.

"Jaks is out," Mahria said. She had her finger pressed to the man's neck. "His heart's beating, though. He'll be fine. I think it's just Healing Trance again. Bastard's regeneration is insane. I mean, look at him, there's not a scratch on him."

"Gods' damned mushrooms," Stoneshield said, wrapping the cloth around his knee.

"At least we got tha fucks," Kettel said, gesturing to the burning building. Belatedly, he realized that the cut on his hand from the glass had healed. *The potion?* He rubbed the mixture of blood, potion, and mud on his punctured arm, which was still burning slightly, even though it had been hours.

"We're fucked!" Elmwood said, coughing as he pushed himself away from the puddle of his own vomit. "Totally fucked! We'll never make it back now."

"Calm the hells down," Stoneshield said. "Summon your damn ent, and somebody drag me away from this fire before I cook. I swear, if any of you even think about leaving me here, I'll murder you."

"Um, problem," Mahria said, pointing. Kettel's blood ran cold when he saw what she'd seen. There was an enormous group of Coal Lurkers headed straight for them down the street. No, enormous was too small of a word. It looked like every Coal Lurker in the city had come to play, bringing their entire families with them, going by the number of broodlings. The clitter-clack of their armored legs grew louder, the sounds blending together until it sounded like distant rain, then a downpour, drowning out the crackling of the burning house. *I thought fire drove monsters away. Guess I was bloody wrong about that. Fuck!*

Elmwood fell back to his knees. "Oh Dysteas, forgive me for my lack of faith. I'll sing of your glory night and day, I swear it. Please! Shelter me in your light!"

"Shut the fuck up!" Mahria shouted, raising her staff horizontally across her head. "Summon the damn ent. Kettel, stop gawking and distract them or something. I'm gonna drop a Froststorm right on us, but I need time."

"Oh, great, that'll fuckin' help!" Kettel said sarcastically, opening fire on the approaching spider wave. *At least I don't have ta' aim. Depths, there's thousands of 'em.*

Stoneshield struggled himself up into a sitting position, then cried out and fell back to the ground. Mindyblades was up, still coughing and with snot running from her nose, but she had her swords in her hands.

"I just need sixty seconds," Mahria shouted.

"Well, we're dead, then," Kettel said, launching another Firebolt.

Jaks suddenly gasped, sitting up. He took one look at the oncoming horde, then started to laugh. "What the depths did I miss?"

Jaks was still laughing when the spider-things swarmed over them. It didn't seem very funny to Kettel. He screwed his eyes shut and flailed about wildly, calling fire to his fists, and rolling on the ground, trying to smash the spiders to pulp. He felt the sharp pinpricks of their legs tearing into him, and the wet sucking pressure of their sucker-mouths as they latched onto his skin. He didn't scream. Screaming would just let them get down his throat.

Flamestrike! Flamestrike! Flamestrike!

Kettel was completely focused on the burning interface in his mind as he fought to keep the panic at bay. His mana was burning away, the white bar that represented his reserves being consumed by fire with each cast. Likewise, his green health bar was crumbling to ash as spiders attached themselves to him faster than he could remove them. He could *feel* the blood being drained from his body even as his skin crisped from the heat of his own flames.

"Summon Lesser Ent!" Elmwood shrieked, his shrill cry cutting through the clacking din and Jaks's continuing laughter.

*No, ye fucks! **Flamestrike! Flamestrike!** I ain't dyin' like a coward! **Flamestrike!***

The last sliver of Kettel's mana bar vanished in a puff of smoke, and he had to fight to stay conscious. He wasn't sure if one of the monsters had stabbed its armored leg into his brain, or if the excruciating agony was just from the mana usage. Burning smoke filled his lungs, rank with the scent of burning hair, blood, and shit. He couldn't breathe; the heat was overwhelming. Still, he didn't stop fighting. He tore the spiders away, ripping out what felt like huge chunks of his flesh in the process.

Ah, balls. His health had dropped down to a quarter, and he could feel the strength draining from his limbs.

Suddenly, a howling wind filled the air. There was a thunderous crack, and an explosion of kill notifications filled his mind with fire even as his body was pelted by freezing sleet. Mahria's voice reverberated through the air, seeming to come from the maelstrom itself.

"FROSTSTORM!"

Jaks's laughter was the last thing that Kettel heard before the fire in his mind extinguished, along with his consciousness.

"Congratulations," Rain's voice said. "You died."

"Welcome to the club," someone else said, a voice that Kettel didn't know.

He opened his eyes, fighting against the light and the disorientation. Rain was there, and the man from the Fells, and what was clearly a divine messenger, her beautiful face lit by the brilliant smoke that was flowing from her skin.

Where am I? That light...Heaven Dystees? Did Elmwood actually—?

"I'm dead?!" he shouted, trying to sit up.

He didn't make it very far. The moment his head lifted from the ground, he was struck by a gut-wrenching bout of vertigo and a spike of pain that made him abort the attempt.

Rain laughed, sounding relieved as he hugged the divine messenger. "He's fine."

What? The clouds were spinning in the sky, and his thoughts felt sluggish and snarled. Why is Rain...here?

"It was close," the divine messenger said, smiling compassionately at Rain as he released her. "We got to him just in time." Kettel blinked as the light faded, realizing that it was just the same spell Rain was always using, though the luminous smoke had been behaving slightly differently. The woman's face also wasn't as divine as it had seemed. She was beautiful, yes, but it was an earthly beauty.

"I think I'm in love," he said stupidly, staring at her.

"Does this happen to you a lot, Ameliah?" the man from the Fells asked.

"All the time," she said, sounding suddenly tired.

"Here, Kettel," Rain said, sweeping off his thick black cloak and heading toward him. "Looks like you need my cloak again."

"But I'm no cold—oh." Looking down, Kettel had noticed that he was completely naked, his body lying bare on the dirt. He looked back up, his face heating as Rain covered him with the fabric. "It were the Froststorm, I swear."

The man from the Fells snorted, then turned and walked away.

"Uh huh," Ameliah said, turning to Rain. "I'm going to go fix the others. They'd probably be fine, but I'm not waiting for Wallace. Sooner is better than later with healing."

"Thanks, Ameliah," Rain said. "I don't know what I'd have done without you." He glared at Kettel, then jerked his head toward her. "Say thank you, idiot," he hissed.

"Thank you," Kettel said woodenly. The clouds were still spinning. *I...I'm really alive?*