

124: Engage

"Which of these do you trust the most?" the cervidian asked, gesturing to Tarny and his companions as he looked at Lord Rain.

"What?" Lord Rain asked. "It doesn't matter, Tallheart. Any of them."

"Hmm," Tallheart said. Tarny froze as he felt the smith's pale eyes settle on him. "You. Come here."

Without hesitation, Tarny took a step forward. Tallheart picked up the metal object from the table next to him and held it out. It was a metal spike, like a nail, but fully the length of a man's leg. It was made of dark iron, flaked with rust.

"Anything that the tip touches will be destroyed," Tallheart said as he held it out to him sideways with one arm. "Do not make me regret making this."

Carefully, Tarny accepted the implement with both hands, struggling with the weight as he cradled it to his chest. Tallheart only released it when he was sure that he had a firm grip.

"This is the limit of iron," Tallheart said, speaking over Tarny's head as if he didn't exist. "The point holds enough power to deal...mmm...perhaps five thousand damage. A touch should be all that is needed."

"Holy fu—" Lord Rain said, cutting himself off.

Tarny's heart, too, skipped a beat at the number spoken by the smith. He stared at the rusted iron spike held in his hands with a new wariness. There were no runes—nothing to indicate it was anything other than a bit of old iron. Nevertheless, he thought he could feel the raw power of the enchantment trembling within the metal, begging to be released. It suddenly seemed even heavier than it had a moment ago, his arms shaking from the weight.

"Mmm," the smith rumbled. "It will only last for one strike. The metal is already degrading." He looked at Tarny, his face like a granite wall. "You should make haste. I will not be able to construct another." He looked away. "I lack the required materials."

"Yeah, wow, okay," Lord Rain said. "Tarny, go. No, wait. Someone help him. Carry it between you. You'll never make it the whole way with something that heavy. And be *careful*."

"No shit, Captain," Mollo said. He carefully moved beside Tarny, and the two of them maneuvered the spike until they were carrying it between them like the deadliest battering ram in existence. Tarny tried to keep the distaste for the man who'd supposedly been a servant from showing on his face.

"Go on, we'll follow," Corrin said.

Tarny nodded, and he and Mollo began carefully guiding the spike toward the lair. They paused while the others helped them bundle up their faces, then passed through. The walk to the core room was cold and nerve-wracking. Tarny feared nothing more than that he'd trip on something buried beneath the snow and land atop that wicked spike.

At last, they reached the core, and the blue light of the gem trapped in the ice washed over them as they entered the room.

"Hold on," Fredek said, stepping forward, mining pick in hand. "The ice grew back like Rain said it would. Let me clear it. We've only got one shot."

"Be quick about it," Clubbs said. "Here, let me help. We don't know how much longer the enchantment will last."

Tarny waited, arms aching as the pair smashed away the protective pillar of ice. Fredek had made a living of brawling in taverns, if he recalled correctly, and Clubbs had been a farmer. Tarny found himself wondering how their strength compared to his as he watched them work. He was no slouch—he'd been on Vanna's crew, after all—but the spike was *heavy*. Tallheart, however, had treated it as if it weighed no more than a slender twig.

Tarny tightened his grip, refusing to let the strain show on his face. *My path lies in another direction, but perhaps one day...*

Finally, Clubbs and Fredek stepped away, revealing the core hanging free in the air.

"Ready?" Mollo asked, looking at Tarny. The uncouth man was smiling, though his arms seemed to be trembling.

Tarny nodded, smiling back. Whatever he thought about Mollo as a person, he couldn't deny the camaraderie that he felt in this situation. It was finally time for them to awaken. *For ME to awaken. I'll show you, Lord Rain. I'll show you what I can do. I am honored to follow in your footsteps.*

Carefully, the two of them guided the tip of the weapon toward the naked heart of the lair before them. By unspoken agreement, they both stopped with the point a mere finger's

breadth from the core. Tarny glanced back at the others, cowering near the door, then at Mollo.

"On three?" he asked.

"Fucking, on three, aye," Mollo said, grinning from ear to ear.

As one, they counted, then stabbed forward. Any doubt Tarny had concerning whether they'd been too slow evaporated as a colossal explosion rocked the chamber. He and Mollo were hurled back, their padded winter gear saving them from injury as they hit the ground.

Spots of light flickered in Tarny's vision as he rolled himself over, his ears ringing. He looked up to see the aftermath, then blinked. The remains of the pillar were gone, but the core was still there. There was a hole in the far wall as if someone had decided to smash a window through the stones with a sledgehammer.

"...the hells happened!" Fredek's voice rose over the ringing as he entered Tarny's field of view.

"It didn't work!" someone else shouted. It might have been Lago—Tarny was having trouble distinguishing their voices. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Gods, look at the bar," someone said. Tarny looked, seeing the iron spike lying on the floor amid the flattened shards of the pillar of ice. Before his eyes, the metal flaked away into powder, then vanished into smoke. Slowly, the ringing in his ears began to fade.

"Fucking hot dog shit for breakfast!" Mollo sputtered. The man had gotten to his feet, looking unsteady.

Tarny could forgive him for that one. He accepted a hand from Clubbs, allowing the stocky farmer to pull him to his feet, then shook out his cloak. Powdered ice from the pillar was dusted all across the room, with a larger shard here or there.

"He could have warned us about the explosion," Telen said from where he was inspecting the hole in the wall. "If one of us had been standing in the wrong spot..."

"Maybe he didn't know," Lago said, peering at the core. "Maybe it was, like, a reaction or something." He rapped the gem with his knuckles. "There's not a scratch on this thing. Just how tough is it?"

"It isn't a matter of how tough it is," Corrin said, shaking his head. "Like I said before, I think you need to be awakened." He turned his head to Ruce. "Sorry, Ruce, you were wrong. If that didn't do it, nothing will."

Ruce shrugged. "Not like I could've known an enchanted weapon wouldn't work. Not like you could've, neither."

"True," Corrin said with a sigh.

"What now?" Clubbs asked.

"We return to the captain," Tarny said firmly, resolve hardening in his heart. "He will know what to do." He walked toward the portal, hiding a grimace of pain with every other step. It appeared he hadn't landed quite as well as he'd thought.

The group followed him out, finding Lord Rain waiting for them, along with Tallheart and Ameliah. The powerful presence of Rain's soul washed over Tarny, comforting in its weight.

"Captain!" Tarny said, resisting the urge to bow. "The weapon worked, but the core was not destroyed."

"Hmm," Tallheart mumbled. "What do you mean, 'worked'?"

"We touched the tip to the core after clearing the ice," Tarny said, looking at him. "There was an explosion that destroyed the pillar and blasted a hole in the far wall. Mollo and I were sent flying by the force."

"Are you okay?" Lord Rain asked, glancing from Tarny to Mollo and back.

"We are," Tarny lied, glancing at Ameliah. *I could ask her... No. I will not show weakness in front of Lord Rain for mere bruises.*

"Damn," Rain said with a sigh. "Well, it was worth a shot." He looked from Tallheart to Ameliah, then rubbed at his eyes. From a pouch, he drew a bag, then dumped the contents onto his open palm. Eight small stones, seven black, and one white, each carved with the symbol of the Worker. Ranks pieces.

"I'm going to put these back in the bag," Rain said. "The eight of you will draw stones, one at a time. The white stone...loses." He shook his head, tipping the stones into the bag and giving it a shake. "Sorry. We need an awakened to take their place."

"Understood, Captain," Tarny said. *A fair system. Regrettable, but fair. Should I ask him if I... No. He does not play favorites.*

"Here," Rain said, offering Tarny the bag. "Let everyone draw before you look." Wordlessly, Tarny reached in and drew a stone, holding it in his closed hand. *Fate will not fail me.*

One-by-one, they drew, until all eight of them stood with their fists held out in front of them.

"Go ahead," Rain said.

Tarny looked down at his hand as he flipped it over and opened his fingers. He felt his heart stop as he stared at the white stone resting on his palm.

Rain led the group through the darkness in silence, lost in his own thoughts. He kept putting himself in Tarny's shoes, thinking about how he might have felt in his place. To come so close to awakening, only to have his chance taken away by a twist of fate.

In the grand scheme of things, Tarny was merely back in the same boat as the others that had lost the drawings, but Rain knew that would be scarce comfort. Losing something always hurt more than never having it in the first place. It was a simple fact of human psychology.

To his credit, Tarny hadn't argued against the decision. Hadn't raged. Hadn't demanded best two out of three. He'd simply stared at the white stone in silence. Eventually, Ameliah had taken him back to the camp at Rain's request, leaving him to manage the others. He was confident that she would know what to say. He was sure that he didn't.

Rain looked up, realizing that he'd crossed into the light. He didn't speak as he led the others inside the stone building, not wanting to break the reverent atmosphere. As he inspected the room, he noted that the pillar of ice had started to reform, growing from both floor and ceiling. It had yet to encapsulate the core, but it was getting there. The hole that Tallheart's weapon had blasted in the far wall was still there, unchanged, Rain assumed. There was no indication that the lair was attempting to repair the damage to the stone.

Rain shook his head, walking up to the core. He glanced at the others, who were watching him with anticipation in their eyes. They looked excited. Eager. That made him feel slightly better. Seven out of eight was still something.

He held back a sigh. *Assuming it works.*

Rain looked at the core. He'd long-since prepped everyone on what to expect, telling them of soul-space, accolades, interfaces, and more, though with the disclaimer that not all lairs were the same.

Adventurers used the term 'accolade' to refer to any reward for breaking a core, but it wasn't always something you could keep, like his perception boost. There was always a plate, as he understood it, but sometimes it was nothing more than a glorified coupon. As an example, Ameliah said she'd once received a thousand Tel from a lair. The plate it had given her had dissolved into a mountain of the tiny crystals in her hands.

Inconvenient, that.

A single GranTel would have had the same value and been much more manageable.

In any event, Rain didn't know if such a single-use accolade would have the same awakening effect as one of the more permanent variety. He also didn't know if he'd be able to break the core in the first place, nor if his damaged soul would get in the way.

In fact, he was actually hoping that the lair might do something to help him. That was why he'd taken it upon himself to lead the group, rather than sending someone else. Breaking a higher-leveled core wouldn't raise the cap for someone who was already awakened, that he knew. The only questions were if he was strong enough to break the core and if his soul was intact enough to manage it.

Rain clenched and unclenched his hands, then removed his right gauntlet with a twist. "Here we go."

The impatient whispers that had started behind him abruptly cut off. Rain wrapped his fingers around the glowing blue gem, finding it slightly too large to grasp completely. It was cool to the touch. Rain waited there, holding the gem gently as he strained with all of his senses. *This is your last chance, core. If you're alive, send me a sign.*

There was no response, not so much as a flicker in the steady blue glow. Linksight was as silent as the air in the chamber.

Rain tightened his resolve. *So be it. If I'm wrong...I'm sorry.*

He squeezed.

The core shattered. It broke easily, as if it had been made from hollow glass. Rather than digging into his flesh, the shards simply evaporated into blue light, which quickly vanished. Rain barely noticed this before he found himself abruptly in the void. There had been no fanfare, just a sudden, instantaneous transition.

Though he'd been expecting it, Rain's eyes widened. He looked down to see his avatar wearing the same outfit he'd crafted upon his previous excursion to this bizarre not-reality—a simple long-sleeved shirt and jeans, though the texture was lacking.

As before, his body in this place appeared to be a translucent-blue projection—a hologram. Also as before, the damage to his soul quickly made itself apparent. With no warning, a glitch snapped his head back up, wrenching his perspective and leaving him staring straight ahead at the darkness. It swirled like smoke beyond his zone of influence, the absence of light given physical form.

Rain waited for a few breathless moments, grappling with his growing unease. He'd already considered the possibility that his damaged soul might prevent the accolade from appearing, leaving him banished in the shadow realm. He'd discounted this as a needless worry, reasoning that it had only happened before because the Majistraal artifact had been holding him. *There's nothing to do that, this time. Unless the lair...*

Just as Rain began to panic in earnest, there was a blue flash in the darkness. The light rushed toward him, ignoring the incongruent geometry of soulspace to hover right in front of his eyes as it condensed into an object. It was a plate, still spun from light like his avatar, though a deeper blue.

Rain sagged with relief. He reached for the plate, then hesitated, looking around at the emptiness. *I could...wait. Stay a while and run some experiments...*

After a moment, he snorted. *This isn't the time to screw around.*

Reaching out slowly to avoid any glitches, he plucked the plate from the emptiness. As he did, the glow faded, white letters forming as the light transformed itself into deep-blue metal.

Accolade of the Essed Frostbarrows
Grants the ability to use Ice Bolt

With a sickening jerk, Rain was abruptly back in his body. The twisted sense of vertigo that accompanied the transition left him reeling. It and the initial delay in the plate's appearance were good indicators that his soul damage had caused an issue after all.

"It worked!" shouted Fredek.

"Yeah!" someone else shouted.

"Uh...Captain?" Telen said, pointing toward the door to the void with the torch he was holding.

Coming back to himself, Rain blinked, then looked, his eyes widening as he saw whiteness. Snow. No, a blizzard. The lack of wind belied the torrent of flakes falling from the sky.

"Move, people!" Rain shouted, his thoughts dropping back into gear. "Out through the arch!"

He didn't need to tell them twice. Everyone had heard the story of what had happened with the Spirit Caller. As they scrambled for the exit, the wind began at last. Snow whipped through the door, blasting them with cold and threatening to blow out their torches. Rain was the last through. He'd forced himself to maintain a brisk walk, rather than resorting to a mad dash as the others had done, worried what would happen if he slipped.

The staging area appeared before Rain's eyes. Tallheart was still there. He was currently helping Mollo to his feet as the others stared past Rain toward the barrier.

Rain walked forward casually, not interrupting his stride, though his heart was beating furiously in his chest. He had his image to consider. Passing the others, he pivoted smoothly to see the barrier behind him quivering. As he watched, the swirling wind destabilized, growing even more turbulent. Suddenly, the entire thing popped like an enormous soap bubble, exploding into a shower of snow.

As the air slowly cleared, the ruins of Essed were revealed. The real village was considerably smaller than the fake version they'd found within the lair, judging from what little of it Rain could see. It seemed there'd been a fire, and many buildings had collapsed in on themselves.

"Hmm," Tallheart rumbled. "The village remains." He paused. "Perhaps...the villagers as well?"

Rain nodded, then used Detection. After waiting for the return, he shook his head. "No." He pinged a few more times. "There are bodies, but nothing alive. Human or otherwise. Not within range, anyway."

"Mmm," Tallheart said somberly, turning and walking back toward their camp.

"Where are you going? Don't you want to know if it worked?" Rain asked as he passed.

Tallheart paused, then glanced over his shoulder. "It is obvious that it did," he said.

"Oh," Rain said, watching the others stare into space, interacting with things he couldn't see.

"Yeah, I suppose it is."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, turning away once more.

"Hey, Tallheart," Rain said.

"Yes?" Tallheart asked, stopping and tilting his head, but not looking back.

"If you're going back to camp, tell Vanna to get people ready to search the village. We'll... collect the bodies. Then have a memorial for them or something."

"I will do so," Tallheart said, nodding. He took a few more steps, then jumped, landing atop the earthen wall surrounding the staging area, making the incredible three-meter leap look effortless.

Rain snorted as Tallheart dropped down the other side and out of sight. *I suppose if I could jump like that, I wouldn't bother with stairs either. Wait, I have Velocity. I actually can jump like that, can't I?*

"Is that the accolade?" Corrin asked, startling Rain as he moved next to his elbow.

Rain looked back down at the plate that he only now realized he was still holding. He looked at Corrin, then nodded. "Yeah." He bit his lip behind his helmet, reading the words once more. He'd been interrupted by the collapse of the lair before he could even process just how *rare* this kind of accolade was supposed to be. *I mean, it's only a tier-zero skill, but still.*

"Wasn't there supposed to be..." Corrin waved his hands, "...some sort of...soulspace or something? I didn't see anything like that, just a window in my face." He swiped at the air a few times. "Huh. That's funny. It's using the numbers you taught us, not the ones I've known my whole life. It says I'm level zero."

Rain blinked, coming back to himself. He stared at Corrin, then at the others.

"Did any of you see the void?" he asked. "Or get something like this?" He held up the plate.

Confused looks and various signs of negation greeted him.

"Huh," Rain said, staring back at the metal rectangle in his hand.

"Maybe it's either-or?" Clubbs asked.

"No," Rain replied. "When this happened before, the person we awakened got an accolade, the same as everyone else."

"Could be this was a different kind of lair, like you said," mused Telen.

"Maybe..." Rain replied, unsure. *What was different?* He looked up at the others. *Different level. Different number of unawakened... Different number of people in general, actually. We had seven then, not eight. Could there be some...finite amount of essence or whatever? What takes more, an awakening, or creating an accolade? Damn it, I need more data.* He shook his head.

"Does anyone's interface tell them what their cap is?"

"Uh, how can I tell?" asked Mollo.

"Look for any numbers that aren't your stats or your vitals," Rain said. "Maybe a nine, like the lair was. It won't be higher than that." Without bothering to consider whether it would work, he dismissed the accolade, which vanished without complaint into his soul. Only after he'd done it did he realize how effortless it had been. *Did...I get healed? Am I fixed?* He concentrated on the other accolades beneath his breastplate. Nothing happened. *Hmm. Maybe not. Damn.*

"I don't have any numbers," said Mollo.

Rain blinked as his mind ground to a halt. "Wait, what? Really?"

Mollo nodded.

Rain shook his head in disbelief. "I mean, I've heard of that, but how—? What does it say about your stats?"

"Fucking pathetic," Mollo said with a grin, gesturing as if he was holding something, though there was nothing in his hand. "For all of them. It's jars with labels on 'em saying the stat and telling me how shit I am in it. And I've got this like, other jar full of bloody magic juice or something." He held up his empty hand, shaking it in the air as if he was indeed holding a jar and sloshing the contents around. "I think if I pour it in one of the others, that's how I boost my stats. Makes more sense than your damn windows or whatever it was."

Rain blinked, then deadpanned, "Ah, yes. Jars. Of course. It makes so much sense. Clearly better."

"Oh, fuck you," Mollo said, laughing.

Rain snorted and shook his head. "Anyone else?"

After some discussion, it didn't seem that anyone had an interface that listed their level cap. Though the format varied, everyone seemed to get more-or-less the same information Rain had gotten when he'd first awakened—stats, vitals, available skills, and so forth. Only Mollo had an interface devoid of numbers. Corrin's was the closest to Rain's, using Arabic numerals, but not the metric system. Rain hoped that that would change for everyone as he continued their reeducation.

Eventually, Rain decided that they'd be better off just heading back to the camp. Theorizing about the system at a meta level was a rabbit hole that he could easily get lost in, and it was better-done over food, anyway. There'd be plenty of time for him to interrogate the new awakened in the coming days. Right now, he had something he needed to do.

After leaving the others with Vanna, Rain walked through the camp. He greeted people politely as he passed, but didn't stop to engage in conversation. Upon reaching the center, he

pinged with Detection, then frowned, spinning to the left and striding off. He pinged again, then increased his pace, heading for the wall.

Tarny was on his own out there, against his standing orders. From the top of the wall, Rain spotted him sitting under the shadow of a tree a short distance away. Rain quickly dropped down and crossed the snowy ground, scanning for any threats. It was day, and monsters were unlikely to attack with so many people nearby, but it never hurt to be too cautious. There had been incidents, after all.

Tarny turned as Rain approached, and Rain saw that his eyes were red and puffy.

Ah, Rain thought as the man struggled to his feet. *It's even worse than I thought it would be.* He automatically controlled his expression before he remembered that he was still wearing his helmet, never having removed it after leaving the lair.

"Captain," Tarny choked. He sniffed, rubbing at his nose with the sleeve of his gambeson.

"Tarny," Rain said, pretending he didn't notice the man's state out of respect for his dignity. "I recall saying nobody was to leave the camp on their own." He raised his hand, stopping Tarny, as it looked like he was struggling to find a response. "I understand why you might have wanted to be alone, but it is still reckless. You could have asked Ameliah to make you a private chamber, or—" Rain sighed, stopping and shaking his head. "You know what, forget it. It's fine. You were close enough to the walls, and I wanted to talk to you alone anyway."

Tarny looked down and away. Rain frowned, considering his next words carefully.

"Tarny," he finally said, bringing the man's attention back to him. "Just so you know, the core-break worked. The others are now awakened, but we don't know what their caps are yet."

Tarny looked up, hurt confusion on his face. Rain winced, then hurriedly continued. "There was a complication. We don't know why, but none of them received an accolade, only me." He held up his hand, the dark blue plate dropping into it easily. "This one."

Tarny sniffed again. Rain grimaced. *Damn it, this isn't going well. Better just plow on.* "Watch," he said, raising his other arm, pointing at a nearby rock. **Ice Bolt.**

With a blast of blue interference, a twisted shard of ice formed. It launched itself from Rain's hand at an angle, then slewed to the side as it flew before crashing lengthwise into a tree with a crystalline impact. *Not bad. Never mind that the tree wasn't what I was aiming for.* He looked back at Tarny, who was staring numbly at the damaged section of bark where the bolt had shattered.

"Ice Bolt, tier-zero," Rain said as he lowered his arm. "The accolade lets me use it, which is exceedingly rare as I understand it. I'm not sure exactly how much this plate is worth, but a few thousand Tel wouldn't be a bad estimate. As long as someone has it in their possession, they can cast the spell freely, even rank it up, in theory." He held out the plate. "Here."

Tarny's eyes widened, but he didn't attempt to take it, even taking a step back. "My Lord, I..." he struggled, his mouth making uncertain shapes as he tried to decide what to say.

For once, Rain decided to let the title slide. "Go on. I want to see what will happen."

Hesitantly, Tarny stepped forward, extending a hand. He paused, looking at Rain, only taking the accolade after another nod of encouragement.

At once, Tarny stumbled back. At the same time, Rain felt a twinge from linksight as the plate unbound itself from him, presumably binding to Tarny instead.

Rain smiled. "What do you see?" he asked, watching Tarny's eyes as they moved, clearly reading text.

"I-I see the skill!" Tarny gasped. "It says...provisional interface. What does it mean?"

"Interesting," Rain said. *I wasn't expecting that.* "I suppose it means the system is letting you interact with some small part of it, even though you aren't awakened. Can you see anything else? A status window, or some stats or something like that?"

"No," Tarny said after a moment, "but I feel...something. Is this mana? Can I..." He looked at Rain as if asking for permission.

"Go ahead," Rain said, gesturing toward the tree. "Give it a try."

"How?" Tarny asked, sounding overwhelmed.

Rain tilted his head, considering. "For me, I used to just focus on the name of the spell, and this little icon would come up on my interface. Then I could sort-of *will* it to work. Now, it's become automatic. I barely even have to think about it anymore."

Reverently clutching the plate to his chest with one hand, Tarny turned to face the tree. He raised his other arm, a look of concentration on his face. He gasped as the shard of ice formed. Rain noted that it looked much sharper than his own deformed version had. Tarny stumbled slightly as the bolt shot away from him, spearing into the tree dead-on, penetrating deep into the wood and staying there.

"Nice shot," Rain said. "Nailed it, first try."

"Lord Rain," Tarny gasped, turning, hints of tears once-more in the corners of his eyes. He shook his head. "Captain. I... I can't..." He took a deep breath, then seemed to force himself to smile. Looking like a starving man pushing away his dinner, Tarny pried the plate away from his chest and held it back out to Rain.

Rain snorted. "No. Keep it."

"Really?" Tarny asked, his tear-filled eyes widening as he stared down at the plate.

Rain smiled, then reached up and unscrewed his helmet so Tarny could see his expression. *I should have done that to begin with.* "Yes, really. Ice Bolt is of little use to me. As you saw, my armor throws off the magic. Therefore, I'm donating the accolade to the company, and I've decided that you'll be its first bearer. You can use it as much as you'd like until you don't need it anymore. I hope that you'll then pass it on to someone else."

"I'm... I mean..." Tarny sputtered, clutching the plate to his chest again. "Thank you, I—"

"This is what Ascension is, Tarny," Rain said, shifting his helmet so he was holding it under his arm. "I'm not going to hoard power or wealth when someone else needs it more. Not when sharing benefits us all." He turned away, heading back toward the wall. "Come on. Let's get you back to the camp."

Rain smiled to himself as he heard Tarny following.

Two days later, it was snowing lightly as dawn broke over Ascension. The camp was quiet, with only the sentries standing guard atop the wall moving in the stillness. Fires burned there, as well as within the camp in the various divided sleeping areas where people slumbered soundly. It would be a while, yet, before the awakened would rise.

Rain smiled as he lay in the sculpted depression Ameliah had made for him, amused, considering just how appropriate that title actually was. All of the freshly awakened company members would be getting their daily alarms in a few hours. The entire culture of this world seemed to operate on that schedule, everyone rising well after the sun had risen, awakened and unawakened both.

Carefully, Rain got to his feet, tiptoeing to avoid disturbing Ameliah, who was slumbering nearby. The sleeping chamber they were in was somewhat cramped, the two of them sharing it with Tallheart, Jamus, and Meloni—plus Cloud and Dozer, of course. Dozer's enforced sleeping arrangement had become a routine in the past few days, and amazingly, Ameliah hadn't even complained. Instead, she'd even laughed about it, deciding to indulge Dozer, citing the fact that nobody wanted to see a pouty slime.

Said slime shifted as Rain moved away, reacting to his departure. He could feel Dozer's discontent through the link that connected them. Focusing, Rain gently nudged the slime back to sleep with thoughts of comfort and warmth.

Creeping past the others, Rain moved out into the central area of the camp. There was a line of sleds there, mostly packed and ready to go, dusted by a coating of snow that hadn't been melted away from the heat of the fires. The sleds were stuffed to bursting with supplies scavenged from frozen root cellars and pantries. Essed hadn't been affected by the toxic chemical transformation that had gripped Fel Sadanis, fortunately for them.

Had they not been leaving today, Rain would have used the time before the camp woke for his morning exercise routine. His soul hadn't been healed by the core as he'd hoped, his condition unchanged. He still had to deal with the stiffness, heartburn, headaches, and everything else. His morning training helped loosen him up, but it was tiring, and they'd be marching in a few hours anyway. He could deal with it until then.

Rain walked to one of the sleds, pulling free a huge wooden bowl and a small crock of honey. Then, he walked to the next sled over and retrieved a few more things, chief among them a sack of coarse-ground flour. He brought everything over to one of the earthen ovens that Ameliah had sculpted into the wall, setting down the supplies so he could start a fire. As the flames grew, Rain proceeded to busy himself with the making of bread.

By the time the rest of the camp had risen, he had a neat line of five sad-looking loaves that hadn't.

Their supply of starter needed a few more days, it seemed. It didn't matter, though. People still thanked Rain for the "crackers" with enthusiasm, compensating with liberal quantities of butter and good-natured mockery.

The company took their time getting ready, eating richly of the supplies they wouldn't be able to bring with them and luxuriating in the relative comforts of the camp that they'd built over the past few days. Travel discipline would start tomorrow, Rain decided. This waking-up-at-eight thing simply wouldn't do if they were going to make it to Vestvall in any reasonable timeframe. As he tried to hurry them along, he considered whether he should ask Tallheart to make him a bugle.

Around ten, Ameliah lowered one of the walls, creating a passage for the sleds to exit. While Vanna worked to get everyone into formation and out and onto the road, Rain lingered atop the remaining fortifications. He stood facing a line of graves in the field beyond their camp, already covered by snow. He held his head low in silent respect for those that hadn't made it through the shift.

When everything was finally ready, Vanna called to him, and he descended from the wall and spoke with her briefly before moving to the head of the column. Tallheart was there, sitting in the rebuilt forgewagon and chatting with Ameliah and Carten. The smelter in the back shimmered with heat, holding a substantial quantity of molten metal that the smith had yet to cast into ingots. Dozer was somewhere in the middle of the column—playing with Cloud if Rain had to guess from the impression he was getting through the link.

"Are we ready?" Ameliah asked.

Rain nodded. "Yes." He climbed into the forgewagon, standing atop it and signaling to Vanna, who had taken her position at the first sled.

She nodded to him, then turned. "Ascension!" she yelled. "Prepare to move out!"

Rain smiled. *She's getting good at that.* He sat down in the passenger seat, then placed his feet and began to pedal, helping Tallheart bring the flywheel up to speed. Ameliah walked around the forgewagon to stand next to him, and Carten took a defensive position on the other side. Similar groupings were already in place, all down the line, the new awakened spread throughout.

Rain glanced at Ameliah, smiling, then nodded to Tallheart and faced the road ahead. He raised a hand, fingers loose, then gestured forward, speaking in his best Patrick Stewart. "Engage."

"Mmm," Tallheart rumbled, pulling the levers and bringing the forgewagon into lurching motion. The tracks barely even clattered, the "Muffler" Tallheart had added already showing its worth.

"Who was that voice supposed to be?" Carten asked, crunching through the snow beside them.

Rain scratched at his chin, considering. "Well, we do have the time," he said. "Hmm. Where do I even begin?"

Ameliah chuckled. "Uh-oh, Carten. Now you've done it."