

155: Edge

Rain held fast to the dragon-headed prow of the longship as it crashed through the tumultuous waves. The smell of salt was buried beneath that of terror, the crew behind him hauling at the oars to the beat of the drum. Rain, however, felt no fear, cackling maniacally as the icy spray tried to tear him from his perch. "Come on, you cowards! Forward!"

He pointed with his drinking horn, his knees bending to absorb the impact as the ship broke through yet another enormous wave. Their speed was increasing now, driven by the rowers and the growing current. He laughed, thumping his bare chest with the horn, the smell of beer briefly overpowering that of salt as it sloshed over him. He took a deep drink, then cast the horn away and took his other hand from the dragon head to raise both fists to the sky.

"Captain!" Tarny screamed from behind him, his voice filled with fear. "The edge! We need to turn back!"

"Ha!" Rain barked out a laugh at the joke, the wind whipping at his wild hair. The ship crested one last, enormous wave, then began rushing down the other side. There were no waves beyond it, only falling water. He pointed forward, up to the sky. "Gooooo!"

The ship broke free of the waves as its momentum carried it across the rim of the world. The clouds broke, and sunlight made a rainbow of the salty spray as they began to fall.

"Captain!" someone else shouted. It might have been Ameliah.

Rain's stomach clenched as the ship began to tumble, and then he saw the rocks. "No!" he gasped, his eyes widening. "This isn't the way it is supposed to be! We were supposed to soar!"

The jagged spikes of rock below grew larger and larger, the speed of their fall increasing. Fear wormed its way into his heart, then, and he covered his face with his arms, just before the brutal, splintering impact.

Rain lurched up from his pillow, gasping and clutching at his chest. Disorientation washed over him. His body felt...wrong. His fingers... His fingers were... He looked down, seeing a white arm that ended in a stump. An arm that was not his own.

Rain lurched up from his pillow, gasping and clutching at his chest. There was a clang as his armored palm smacked into his breastplate. Rapidly, he became aware of the flickering light of a fire and the acrid smell of burning vegetation. Before he could look around, something slammed into his shoulder, hard enough that he had to brace himself against the ground with an arm or fall over. He looked down, spotting a green, fist-sized object rolling away from him. A sasu.

"Don't do that," Ameliah said. "You scared me halfway to the hells."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "You missed his head."

"I wasn't aiming for his head," Ameliah replied.

Tallheart grunted. "So you say."

Rain looked up to see his friends staring at him, seated across from him around the fire. There was a Ranks board on a log between them, and it looked like they were in the middle of a game. Ameliah had her helmet off, her blond hair appearing reddish in the firelight. "Bad dream?" she asked, looking back at the board.

"What..." Rain said dumbly, raising a hand to his shoulder. *Who throws a dire lime?* He flicked on his HUD, seeing that it was three in the morning.

He sighed, letting his arm fall. "It felt so real."

Ameliah laughed, taking one of Tallheart's pieces with her own. "Well, you are certainly a dreamer. It makes sense that you're good at it."

Tallheart retaliated without hesitation, sliding a piece clear across the board and deep into Ameliah's territory. "Outranked."

"What?" Ameliah said, looking up at him, then back at the piece. Moments later, she cursed. "Damn you!"

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "It is my victory, and thus, your watch until the dawn." He looked over to Rain, the firelight glinting in his pale gray eyes. "Thank you. If you had not distracted her, she would have seen the trap."

Rain blinked. "Happy to help." He looked down at his hands, struggling to remember. He'd been working on the airship in his soul, but then he'd stopped to rest for a minute, and then... "Shit."

"What?" Ameliah asked, busy collecting her pieces.

Rain shook his head. "I fell asleep."

"Yes, we've been over that," Ameliah said.

Rain blinked, then held up a hand. "No, inside my soul. I fell asleep when I was inside my soul."

Ameliah raised an eyebrow at him. "Didn't you say that could be dangerous?" Her smile faded, and her voice became more serious. "Why would you take the risk?"

"I...didn't mean to," Rain said with a sigh. "I shouldn't have made that sofa," he muttered.

Ameliah laughed. "Well, it looks like it turned out okay, so—" Suddenly, she stopped speaking, moving faster than Rain could follow. There was the thrum of a bowstring, and he felt the wind of the arrow as it rushed past his cheek.

Your party has defeated [Scarlet Fatbird], Level 8
Your Contribution: <1%
3 Experience Earned

"Shit," he swore. Detection fired, and three signals appeared in his mind, less than ten meters away. Immediately, he switched to Radiance, not only to see what he was up against, but also to strike at it at the same time.

In an instant, the spell spread to its full range. The entire area within twelve meters was bathed in the light of day, as if someone had switched the sun on like a spotlight. Not all of the light came from Rain, though a good portion of it did, rolling off his armor in golden waves.

Radiance also amplified light that was already there. The campfire blazed like a star, as did everything even remotely shiny in the clearing—reflections of reflections of reflections, building upon each other as they were amplified by the magic. The pile of iron ingots near Tallheart's anvil was painful to look at, but it was nothing compared to the fire, which in turn was nothing compared to the thumb-thick beams of golden light that were spearing outward from Rain's torso.

He was forced to close his eyes, his sleep-addled brain having failed to consider just how much Amplify Aura and Channel Mastery together would boost the spell's brightness. He was nevertheless able to identify the monsters. They were more Fatbirds like the first, judging by the shrieks.

"Hey!" Ameliah shouted. "Warn me first! Gods, that's bright!"

Over ten seconds passed, and Rain cracked open his eyes the barest sliver. He watched in pain as the beams tracked the monsters, searing into them mercilessly. The birds were scrambling, trying to reach cover and failing spectacularly, seemingly blinded. They doubtless had greater Light resistance than he did, but unlike him, they were being targeted by the magic directly. He was just suffering through the mageburn.

Eventually, one of the birds did manage to make it behind the shelter of Tallheart's anvil, but the beam targeting it immediately snapped to the ingot pile, reflecting from it to strike the monster from a different angle. The beam would lose some power to mana absorption from the metal, but it would regain it as it traveled through the overarching field created by the aura.

Rain had run tests. There would be no escaping the fury of the light.

A few more seconds passed, and a trio of chimes sounded in Rain's mind.

Your party has defeated [Scarlet Fatbird]x3, Level 8
Your Contribution: 98%
1176 Experience Earned

He dropped the spell, the reflections vanishing in an instant and plunging the camp into darkness. Rain forced his watering eyes open, spots dancing across his sight as he used Detection again. The scan came up clear. They were safe.

"Well done," Tallheart grumped. "Now I am blind."

"Sorry," Rain said, waving away the dialog and rubbing at his eyes as the afterimages danced across his vision. "I just reacted."

"Well, it's better than freezing us or setting us on fire, I suppose," Ameliah said.

Dimly, Rain managed to make out her form as she crawled over to him. Upon reaching him, she rapped her knuckles against his forehead. "Idiot."

Before he could respond, she brushed his hair out of his eyes, then kissed him in the same spot. He felt healing spread through him, and his vision cleared instantly.

He found himself staring into her eyes. "Thanks," he managed.

Ameliah smiled but didn't pull away. It was clear what she wanted, and she was going to make him be the one to do it.

Rain's eyes flicked to Tallheart.

"Do not mind me," Tallheart said, staring at them blatantly. "I am blind."

Rain looked back at Ameliah. *Ah, screw it.* He moved in, and her smile widened just before his lips found hers. He made it a good kiss, too, determined to show that he was over his shyness, though he could feel Tallheart's eyes bearing down on them the entire time.

"What is happening," Tallheart said mildly. "Describe it to me."

Ameliah broke away, laughing. "Oh, be quiet," she said, searching about for the sasu she'd thrown at Rain. "You aren't blind. You've got more Light resistance than the both of us put together." Hefting the fruit, she whipped it in Tallheart's direction.

Tallheart didn't move, letting the sasu strike him directly between the eyes. "What was that?" he asked as it bounced to the ground.

"Damn it, that's twice now," Ameliah muttered to herself. "Why won't that thing explode?" She shook her head, then gave Tallheart a flat look. "You aren't fooling anyone."

"Is someone speaking?" Tallheart replied. "It seems that I have gone deaf as well."

Rain smiled. He felt...happy. Just happy.

Then his stomach growled. Loudly. He realized that he could smell the sasu, the sharp odor of the fruit telling him that it hadn't survived the collision with Tallheart's face unharmed after all.

Ameliah laughed at his expression, then made a show of looking around. "Depths. Did anyone else hear that? I think there's a sick bear down here."

"Damn it," Rain muttered. "I guess I missed dinner, huh?"

Ameliah laughed again. "Come on, let's fix that before your funny noises attract whatever monsters missed the light show."

As the first pulse of moss-light swept up over the edge of the trees, Rain looked up from the Ranks board. He flicked on his HUD, checking the time to make sure it wasn't a mistake. It wasn't. It really was dawn. They'd been playing for hours, but it had felt like minutes.

"You'll never beat Clubbs if you let yourself get distracted like that," Ameliah said softly, moving a piece.

Rain looked back down, then grinned, recognizing the trap. The board was in nearly the same configuration it had been two games ago. He moved his Defender to block, smiling smugly as he made the move she'd pointed out to him before. *Not this time.*

Immediately, Ameliah reached across the board and slid her Mage down a single square. Rain stared at the piece, sitting on its own in a section of the board seemingly unrelated to their current clash.

Why did she...? I can just take it... But then... And then she'll... Shit, when I moved my Defender... Shit!

Ameliah covered her mouth, quaking with silent laughter. She glanced at Tallheart, who was still asleep, then whispered to Rain, trying to contain her mirth. "Congratulations, you played yourself."

"I should have never taught you that line," Rain whispered back, shaking his head. *She used my memory against me. She made it look like she was trying the same trap as last time so I'd move my Defender.* He looked back up at her. "That's it, you're too good at this. I'd like to win more than one game in five. We're switching back to chess."

"Fine," Ameliah whispered, getting up and stretching. "Tonight, though," she said in a slightly more normal voice. "I've got training to do." She glanced again at Tallheart as she stooped to collect her bow. "Should we wake him, do you think?"

Rain shook his head. "Let him sleep. If he wanted to be up, he wouldn't have disabled his alarm." He gestured over toward the lava lake. "Let's go over there."

"If we're sparring, we're going to wake him up either way," Ameliah whispered, handing Rain his helmet.

"Nothing so strenuous," Rain whispered back with a smile, accepting it. "I'm still a bit wrecked from yesterday. I've got a new spell to try out, though."

"Suppression?" Ameliah arched an eyebrow, and Rain nodded. "Great, I can feel the headache already."

"It's not like I can use it on myself," Rain said, but then he tilted his head. "Actually..."

Suppression (1/10) Exp: 0/800
Increase mana costs for all entities by 25.375 mp (fcs)
Range: 2.03 meters
Cost: 1 mp/s

"Huh," he said, slipping on his helmet as he inspected the skill card he'd just summoned.

"Maybe I can. It just says entities. I'm an entity, and I figured out how to Immolate myself, so..."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a maniac?" Ameliah said.

"Oh, come on," Rain said, smiling, hearing a soft clink of metal on metal. "I'm sure there're Guilders who've come up with crazier training methods." He looked up to see what the sound had been, then blinked.

"I didn't say Guilders weren't maniacs too," Ameliah said, struggling to remove her heavy iron breastplate. "Help me with this."

"What are you doing?" Rain asked, raising an eyebrow before his brain kicked into gear. "Oh, right. Metal. It would absorb the magic. Good thinking." Hurriedly, he moved to help.

It took a few minutes to free Ameliah from her shell and to adjust the straps on her quivers so she could wear them without the bulky armor. Once she was all set, they left Tallheart behind, still somehow asleep. They moved just far enough away to avoid disturbing him, but not so far that they'd be unable to save him should some monster decide that a slumbering cervidian would make a tasty snack. Rain wasn't all that concerned. Tallheart would be fine. It was Ameliah that he was actually worried about. Without her armor, she didn't have any defensive skills to protect her. Even with the accolades, she was vulnerable.

"Okay," Ameliah said at a normal volume, seemingly unconcerned at being without any protection. She adjusted the bow hanging over her shoulder. "Suppress me, maniac."

Rain smiled, pushing aside his concerns as he tightened his grip on his shield. If anything attacked them, he'd be able to deal with it, or at least be able to tank long enough for Ameliah to fill it with arrows. It was nice to feel needed for something other than his mana for once.

"What?" Ameliah asked, smiling at him.

Rain shook his head, not bothering to explain. "Here we go." He reached for the unfamiliar skill, dialing the power way down with Channel Mastery before activating it. Nothing seemed to happen. He glanced at his mana, then at the auto-summoned skill card to check the level.

Suppression (1/10) Exp: 0/800
Increase mana costs for all entities by 2.5375 mp (fcs)
Range: 2.03 meters
Cost: 0.1 mp/s

"Well?" Ameliah said, arching an eyebrow.

"It's on," Rain said. "There doesn't seem to be a visual effect. You don't feel anything?"

Ameliah shrugged. "Nothing. Unless you count the lack of Winter, that is. Have I mentioned I miss Mana Sight?" She slipped her bow off her shoulder, then drew an adamant-tipped arrow. The metal darkened, vanishing from view as wisps of black smoke thickened into a roiling fog, veiling the entire arrow in shadow. She held up the smoking arrow, waving it around and leaving curls of darkness in its wake that quickly dissipated. "Nothing. You didn't exempt me with IFF or anything, did you?"

"No," Rain said, thinking hard. "Huh. Why isn't it— Oh. Dur. Arcane Resistance. Damn, you'd think with all these stats, I wouldn't need coffee to get my brain going in the morning."

"You'd think," Ameliah said.

"Yeah, yeah," Rain said, returning Channel Mastery to neutral.

Suppression (1/10) Exp: 0/800

Increase mana costs for all entities by 25.375 mp (fcs)

Range: 2.03 meters

Cost: 1 mp/s

"There, that should be six points above your Arcane resistance now, assuming it is one-to-one. Try it again." He paused, then hit himself in the forehead with a clang. "Shit. Your bow is metal. I didn't think of that, either. And the arrows. They aren't saturating or anything, are they?"

"Doesn't feel like it," Ameliah said. She shrugged, and the smoke concealing the arrow cleared. "That was me, not you. I just canceled the buff. Recasting now."

The smoke returned, and Ameliah's eyebrows rose slightly. "Okay, that was something."

"What did you feel?" Rain asked excitedly. "It didn't hurt or anything, did it?"

"No," Ameliah said, shaking her head. "It just felt... I'm not sure." The smoke cleared again as she canceled the spell. "Give it more power."

"Amplifying," Rain said, boosting the spell as high as he could without resorting to Aura Focus or messing with the ring. He'd had to disable his macro layer to bypass the safeties on IFF, and he didn't feel like it was worth the effort to boost his Focus manually. Not for a test.

Suppression (1/10) Exp: 0/800

Increase mana costs for all entities by 144.13 mp (fcs)

Range: 1.33 meters

Cost: 18 mp/s

He took a step closer to her, making sure that she was in range. "Okay, that's about as good as I can make it and still watch what you're doing. It should take about 144 extra mana to activate things, minus 19 from your Arcane resistance. Give it a go."

Ameliah nodded, then looked back at the arrow. Immediately, she furrowed her brows. And a faint distortion became visible around her. Pale white lines in the air, streaking down like rain.

"Okay, now that's something," she said, looking around. "The skill doesn't want to activate. It feels...heavy. I'm going to push harder."

Rain nodded, holding his breath. After a moment, the shadowy cloud around the arrow sputtered back into existence, the white lines from Suppression vanishing simultaneously.

Ameliah inhaled sharply, staring at the arrow. "Wow, yeah. You were right about the mana. It took around... Rain? Rain, what's wrong?"

Rain was clutching at his chest, a look of ashen horror on his face. When Ameliah had activated the buff, he'd felt a terribly familiar sensation, one that he'd experienced only once before. A sense of pressure, as if he was about to burst, and then of being dunked into icy water as the pressure vanished.

[Rain-King!] Dozer sent, terrified, having woken from his slumber and swiftly begun to panic.

[Shaking! Danger!]

Rain stumbled, then sat down hard rather than trying to arrest his fall.

"Rain!" Ameliah shouted, casting aside the arrow and rushing to him.

He looked up as she knelt in front of him. Their eyes met, and he felt a flash of connection.

Linksight. Clearer than it had ever been.

He pressed a hand to his chest, futilely trying to block the imagined hole through which his soul was gushing out into the world. "Oh no..."

Tallheart stood at his anvil, hammering at a curved adamant pauldron, but without skills and far too lightly to affect the metal in any way. He was not trying to alter its shape, for it was already as perfect as he could make it. In truth, the final alterations had been completed for some time. He was stalling. He had needed the time to think.

With a deep sigh, he shook his head, returning his hammer to its place at his hip.

Enough.

Taking the pauldron with him, Tallheart walked silently toward where Ameliah was sitting. Rain was prone beside her, still armored, but covered by a blanket and with his head propped up on a pillow. Ameliah was unarmored and resting her head in her hands, her hair veiling her face.

Tallheart couldn't read her expression, but he didn't need to.

As he came to a stop beside her, she sighed and looked up tiredly. "Hey."

Tallheart inclined his head in greeting. "How is he?"

Ameliah grimaced. "No change." She reached down to a metal bowl sitting on the bare earth and removed a wet cloth, wringing it out before dabbing it across Rain's forehead through his open visor.

"Hmm," Tallheart said, frowning as he watched the useless gesture.

"Do you think it would be okay to send a Message now?" Ameliah asked, looking up, her expression pleading. "It's been hours."

Tallheart shook his head slowly. Rain hadn't immediately fallen unconscious after he'd collapsed. His current condition was deliberate. He'd needed a while to calm down, but once he had, he'd asked that they not disturb him before going to inspect the damage. The fact that he had not returned from within his soul meant either that he was not finished with the task, or that he had found himself unable to return.

A Message would not help in either case. At best, it would only be a distraction.

Somewhere in the trees, a Deepcat yowled. Tallheart looked in the direction of the sound sharply, and Ameliah shot to her feet beside him, reaching for her bow. Silence returned almost immediately, but they stood their ground, waiting. When it became clear that the monster wasn't coming imminently, Tallheart allowed himself a sigh. The Deepcat would come, or it would not. They'd suffered more monster attacks today than usual. He was beginning to think that it was not a coincidence.

He looked back at Ameliah as she let herself flop back to the ground. "Do not fear for Rain," he said slowly. "He has doubtless become distracted and forgotten that we are here."

"But—" Ameliah began, but Tallheart interrupted her.

"You have sat idle long enough. Leave Rain to his work." He gestured with the pauldron toward where he'd piled the rest of the armor next to a small boulder. "Come."

"But..." Ameliah tried again, but trailed off in a sigh, finally looking away from the trees. "Fine." She threw down the cloth, muttering under her breath. "Not like I'm doing any good here." She closed Rain's visor much more gently, then got to her feet to accept the pauldron. She barely glanced at it before she looked back at Rain. "I just don't understand why it happened. It was barely any mana at all."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "I have been thinking about that." He turned, walking away. He knew she would follow, so he didn't bother to look back at her as he continued. "Why is an unconscious person more difficult to heal?"

"What?" Ameliah asked from somewhere behind him.

Tallheart said nothing.

"Okay, don't explain," Ameliah said, the sound of her footsteps telling him that she was following. "Fine. I'm not sure what this has to do with Rain, but for healing to work, you need the patient to accept it. People can't do that if they aren't awake."

"And what if a person does not wish to be healed?" Tallheart asked. "Can you do it by force?"

He heard Ameliah stop, and after a moment, he turned to look at her, seeing a pained expression on her face. He frowned. *I am a fool.* "I apologize. I should have chosen a different example."

Ameliah sighed, raising her hand to rub at her eyes. "No, it's fine. I can't blame you for not knowing what not to say when I haven't told you about..." She trailed off.

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "Still. I apologize."

"Don't worry about it." Ameliah shook her head, then looked up. "Yes, you can force healing on an unwilling patient. You just need to suppress the patient's soul with yours. For healing, you need to honestly believe that you're helping them for it to work. You need to override their perspective." She grimaced. "I've...seen it done."

"Mmm," Tallheart said, turning to walk beside her. "I will ask no further. The example has served its purpose. Now, another. If someone wished to afflict you with Malaise, could you choose not to resist?"

"Oh. I see where you're going with this," Ameliah said, coming to a stop beside the pile of armor. "When he used Suppression, it put our souls into conflict."

"Yes," Tallheart said simply, turning to look at her.

"So then I'm the reason—"

"No," Tallheart said.

He raised his hand, his index finger extended. "Rain's soul was already broken. It was repaired, but we do not understand how or whether the repair was complete."

He raised a second finger. "Rain increased his level rapidly, triggering the leveling process multiple times through unnatural means."

A third finger went up. "He ranked a defensive skill from one to ten within the space of a single day."

A fourth. "He has been pushing himself to the point of physical exhaustion and then beyond. Far beyond."

Tallheart finished with his thumb. "He has been abusing accolades and fueling the changes to his body by dining on the flesh of monsters."

Tallheart looked down at his hand, all five fingers extended, then grunted, raising his other hand. "Do I need to continue? Hmph. I suspect I do not have enough fingers." He shook his head, then knelt to sort through the pile of armor. "This was not your fault. If your clash had not triggered it, something else would have soon enough."

"So I should blame Rain for being reckless then?" Ameliah asked. "For over-training? How's that any better?"

"You do not understand," Tallheart said, gesturing for her leg with a greave held in his other hand. "Allow me to think. I will try to find another way to explain."

Ameliah set down her bow and moved over, and Tallheart began helping her get into the armor piece by piece. They continued in silence for some time. It was only after the backplate was in place arching over her shoulders that Ameliah raised her hand to stop him.

"You're right," she said. She gestured around to the trees. To the molten lake of lava. To the outcropping of stone and the cave that led to depths unknown. "Look where we are."

The Deepcat yowled again, but neither of them did more than glance at the trees.

Ameliah shook her head, continuing. "If we were playing things safe, we'd still be on the surface. If we were playing things *safe*, half the people in Vestvall would die come spring." She sighed. "You heard what Rain said. There isn't enough wood to keep the fires lit, and they'd need to go farther and farther to gather it. Even if we somehow solved that problem with our light bulbs, they'd need to go out to tend their fields or starve over the coming year. It's not sustainable. We need to get them out of here."

The Deepcat screeched again, closer now. A bush near the edge of the clearing rustled.

"Would you stay out of this!?" Ameliah yelled, whipping her head in that direction. "Either come out here and die or go back to the hell you came from!"

The bush rustled again, then exploded in a shower of leaves and blood as the boulder they'd been standing next to obliterated it, along with the hidden monster.

"Thank you," Ameliah said, looking back at Tallheart as he lowered his arm and bent to retrieve the breastplate. "As I was saying, pushing ourselves like this is a risk, but it's necessary. We don't have the luxury of taking it slow. He had no way to know how near he was to the edge, and it wasn't like either of us realized the danger either. Hells, I'm doing half the same things he is. My soul could tear too at any moment, but even knowing that, I don't feel like I can stop."

"Raise your arms to the sides," Tallheart said. Ameliah complied, and he continued speaking as he worked. "Make sure to say these things to Rain. You know that he will blame himself for his injury, but you are correct, and he is not. What we do is not without risk. I should know."

Ameliah grunted as Tallheart pressed the breastplate firmly into place. The metal plate interlocked with the backplate with a satisfying click, forming a nearly impenetrable seal around her torso.

Satisfied, Tallheart took a step back. "How is the fit?"

Ameliah grasped at the collar of the breastplate with both hands, pulling it down and twisting it this way and that. "It's a bit tight across the chest."

Tallheart frowned. He'd always pitied human women for their inconvenient anatomy. He was a poor judge, but he believed that Ameliah was slightly more afflicted than average, even for her race. He knew better than to say anything. It was not something she could change, no more than he could saw off his antlers. He had thought he'd left sufficient room, however. "I can make an adjustment," he said slowly, shaking his head. "Hmm. I have seen some human women wearing armor that imitates their form, but I assumed you would not wish to trade durability for vanity. If I was wrong about that, I can—"

"No," Ameliah said with a snort, lowering her arms. A small measure of the tension had drained from her face. "Please, no. As funny as it would be to see Rain's reaction to that stupidity, this is actually a perfect fit. I just needed to get everything in place. It's still a little snug, but that's how it should be." She took a deep breath, then breathed out and bent, touching her toes. "Amazing. It doesn't limit my mobility at all." She stood again, looking him in the eyes. "Thank you so much, Tallheart. I don't think I'll ever be able to repay you for this. This armor has got to be worth...a lot. Like, a barrel full of Tel, a lot."

"Mmm," Tallheart said. "Perhaps not as much as that, but you are correct that the value is significant. You may repay me by continuing to be who you are." He turned, kneeling to sift through the remaining pieces. Ameliah made a sudden movement behind him, and he tensed involuntarily.

It had long since occurred to him that with the armor, the bow, and the skills to back them up, she would be stronger than he was. Not yet, perhaps, but soon enough as she continued to train. If she turned against him, he would have no way to stop her. The risk that he was wrong about her was so low that it was barely worth mentioning, but he felt the threat hanging over him all the same. He couldn't help it. Not with her standing right behind him and out of his sight.

It was perhaps one of the harder things he'd ever done, but he forced himself to relax.

No betrayal came, of course. No death.

Tallheart stifled a sigh. Lilly would have cursed at him, seeing him exposing the back of his neck to anyone, let alone a human with the power to harm him. Lilly had mellowed slightly over the years, but she had never learned to trust. In her fiery youth, she might even have killed him for making equipment for Ameliah and Rain in the first place. It was a betrayal of their cause, or so she would have believed. Of course, back then, when the deaths of their families had been fresh and raw, he would have believed the same.

"What is it, Tallheart?" Ameliah asked, oblivious to his dark thoughts, but not to his hesitation.

"Nothing," he lied, selecting the next piece of armor and standing to face her, carefully hiding his expression. "I merely thought of a more practical way for you to repay me."

"Name it," Ameliah said. "Seriously. I owe you."

Tallheart grunted. "Whenever Rain asks me a question, you will create a distraction."

Ameliah's eyebrows shot up, then she covered her mouth, completely failing to contain the laugh that burst through her fingers. "That's all?" she managed.

"Mmm," Tallheart said, nodding seriously.

"That's no repayment. I'd do that for free. Wait, do you mean, like, any question? As in, 'Hey Tallheart, what do you want for lunch?' or..."

"Any question," Tallheart confirmed, allowing himself to smile. Some wounds could never be healed, but having friends helped. These humans were his, no matter what Lilly would have thought.

Ameliah smirked at him conspiratorially. "Deal." She looked over at Rain, and her smile slowly faded. She sighed deeply, then, running a hand through her hair. "You really think he'll be okay?"

"He will be fine," Tallheart said, his voice incomparably steady in contrast to his thoughts.

"How can you be so certain?" Ameliah asked softly, looking back at him.

Tallheart didn't reply, shaking his head slowly. *Because I need him to be.*